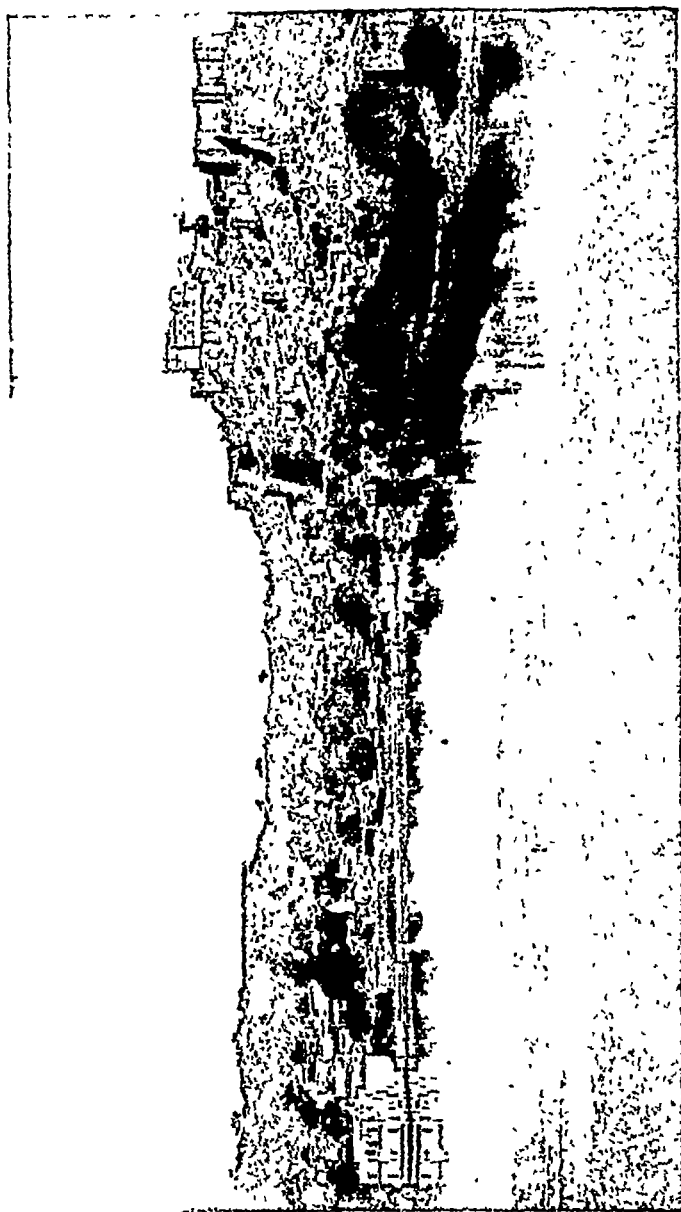


A GALLANT PRINCE



Town and Fort of Banera, Mewar
(From a photograph kindly lent by Rajkumar Man Singh of Banera)

A GALLANT PRINCE

("BHIM SINGH," ABRIDGED AND SIMPLIFIED)

BY

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MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON

1933

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First Edition 1930
Reprinted 1932, 1933

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

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A GALLANT PRINCE

CHAPTER I

THE BROTHERS

"ONLY three times out of five! That is not yet good enough," thought Prince Bhim Singh as he strode over to the wooden target to draw his heavy javelin from the board. The last throw had been the best of the five. The javelin had struck deep into the black line he had painted from top to bottom of his target. But still the Prince was not satisfied. "I used not to miss it so often. I am out of practice. I must go on till I hit the mark five times in succession." Thinking thus, he went back twenty paces to the line from which he had been throwing.

"Hullo, brother!" exclaimed Jai Singh, as he walked across the courtyard of the palace to the corner where Bhim Singh was standing. "How are you getting on?"

"Two misses out of the last five throws. I am out of practice, but I mean to hit the mark five times

without a miss before I stop. Next month is the boar-hunt and I have determined to kill a boar with this javelin. Sit down and watch me."

Jai Singh laughed pleasantly as he sat down on a marble seat and said, "You had better use a spear. I have never heard of anyone using javelins against a boar. It is very unusual and rather risky."

"Yes, I know that, but think of the glory of doing it with success, in our first hunting, too. Now watch me!"

Bhim Singh poised his weapon, took careful aim, raised his arm and made his throw.

"Bravo!" cried Jai Singh as the weapon struck into the black line with a resounding thud. "Now let me see you do that four times more."

Prince Bhim drew out the javelin and made his four remaining throws, each one being perfect, and striking the line above or below the mark made by the first.

"Very good," said his brother, "but the boar, I fear, will not stand as still as that board, and you yourself will be on a galloping horse. Use a spear, my dear brother, and not this strange weapon. What will our father say?"

“Oh, I know he will give me the same advice as you are giving, and so I shall go armed with a spear; but none the less I shall carry this javelin also and hope to find occasion to use it. Now I shall stop my practice for to-day.”

So saying, he went and sat down by his brother, and the two lads began eagerly to discuss the coming event, the great 'boar-hunt' which was to take place in the following month of Phalgun, when the Ahairea festival would be celebrated with much ceremony. It was a very special event in their lives, for it was the first hunt in which they were to be allowed to take part with their elders.

They were handsome lads of exactly the same age, born on the same day and at the same hour, but not of the same mother. Rani Rangadevi, Princess of Rupnagar, Rana Raj Singh of Mewar's favourite wife, was Jai Singh's mother, and consequently Jai Singh was looked upon as the heir-apparent. Bhim Singh was the taller and more active of the two. No one could do such gymnastic feats as he could, vaulting and leaping and swinging on the boughs of trees with almost as much ease and skill as a monkey. He was an excellent horseman and skilful with bow and arrow, with javelin and spear, and learning to become expert in the use of the long

sword. His brother, however, shorter in stature and stouter in body, was inclined to be less active. He did not attempt to emulate Bhim Singh in sports and martial exercises, except in horsemanship, for he was fond of horses, and could ride really well. He was also a good flute-player, and for that reason was more popular than Bhim with the ladies of the Court. In spite of these differences, however, the two Princes were fond of each other, and were very good friends.

“ Well, Bhim, how is Thunderbolt? ”

“ Oh, he is in fine condition. He has now quite recovered from that sprain, and Umar Singh is training him. Thakur Gopinath has promised that, when he comes here very shortly for the Ahairea, he will help in the training. If Thunderbolt knows what to do in boar-hunting, I shall have time to think of how and when to use this javelin.”

Then, after a short silence, Jai Singh replied, “ We must arrange a race between my Lightning Flash, your Thunderbolt, and our father’s Silver Arrow. My good horse is becoming speedier every day. I am certain he can outdistance the others. He may not be so clever at twisting and turning, but I am sure he can go faster than they. Come on, let us fix up a match between them.”

“Go and ask father,” said Bhim Singh, with a smile. “I can imagine his amused look at the suggestion. ‘Jai,’ he will say, ‘we’ll have the match if you so desire, but really your Lightning Flash has not the slightest chance of beating my Silver Arrow. My dear son, in this case, the wish is father to the thought’.”

“Yes, I know he will. Our father is very proud of his horse, and of his fame as the fleetest in all Rajasthan, but my beloved steed will beat him. I know he will.”

“Very well,” said Bhim, “we’ll put the matter to the proof. When all the chieftains have assembled we’ll arrange it, but you must request Thakur Gopinath to persuade our father to let me ride Silver Arrow because you and I are more or less of the same weight.”

“You know the Thakur better than I do, so please will you ask him to do this for us?”

“All right, I will. Now let us have some music. You must practise some tune of triumph, and compose stanzas in honour of your victory.”

“Don’t laugh at me, brother. Anyhow, a song of triumph must be composed, for, if it is not needed by me, it will be useful in the celebration of your killing a boar with your javelin.”

“Now it is you who are laughing at me, turning the tables on me, so to speak. But come along, where is your old flute? Tune up.”

“Not here,” replied Jai Singh; “my flute is in the palace. Let us make a move.”

With these words the two lads rose and went to Jai Singh's room.

CHAPTER II

THE BOAR-HUNT

(1) *The Assembly.*

THE eagerly-awaited day had come at last and the brothers were full of joyful excitement. The good-natured Thakur Gopinath had promised to initiate Bhim Singh into the mysteries of the boar-hunt, whilst Jai Singh was to accompany his father, the Rana. Everyone assembled on the great terrace in front of the palace was in holiday mood; much talking and good-humoured laughter was heard on all sides. From far and near the feudal chieftains had come, at the invitation of their gracious sovereign, to celebrate the Ahairea. Dressed in tunics and turbans of green, the customary gift of the Rana to his invited guests on this festival day, they looked a fine, manly set of men.

“Well, my boy,” said Thakur Gopinath to Prince Bhim, “I think Thunderbolt will carry you well to-day. You must let him go his own way; don’t try to guide him; he knows what to do in chasing a boar better than you do.”

"I am very grateful to you, Thakur, for training him so well, because now I shall be able to give all my attention to my weapons. I have vowed to kill a boar with this javelin."

The Thakur looked at it keenly. "H'm! well! perhaps so! It looks heavy enough if you throw it hard and hit your quarry in a vital spot. But you had better trust to your spear, my lad. What a boy you are, Bhim Singh, for trying to do unusual things!"

The two formed a strong contrast as they sat on their horses a little apart from the others, waiting for the Rana to appear from the inner courtyard of the palace and lead them out to the hunting ground. The Thakur was a middle-aged man in whose short black beard and moustache a few grey hairs were beginning to show. His fief of Ghanerao, on the western slopes of the Aravallis, was an important frontier outpost, and he had as his particular charge the safeguarding of the fortress of Kumbhalmer.

The kettledrums sounded from within the front courtyard of the palace, and soon Rana Raj Singh, mounted on his spirited grey horse, Silver Arrow, famous throughout Rajasthan for its speed, was seen slowly advancing. He was followed by his heir-apparent, Jai Singh, upon another grey horse,

Lightning Flash, which the young Prince believed could defeat his father's horse in a race over any distance. Both father and son were dressed in green, in exactly the same dress as the assembled chieftains wore.

Leaving Thakur Gopinath, Bhim Singh rode to his brother's side and wished him good luck. They followed the Rana, to whom the Rawat of Salumbar was now talking, across the terrace. By twos and threes all the assembled guests of the Rana joined in the procession, and as they passed along towards the Triple Gate they were watched with much interest by the ladies and the children from the screened balconies and windows of the palace.

One of the interested spectators of this picturesque scene was Premabai, daughter of Thakur Gopinath. She was her father's only child and had been motherless for many years. So she often felt lonely, and longed to have companions of her own age and rank. She watched the two Princes riding along side by side, chatting and laughing in a most brotherly way. "How nice it would be," she thought to herself, "if I had those two lads for my brothers, especially Bhim Singh. We could go out together on shikar." It was quite natural that Premabai should think such thoughts, because her father had

brought her up almost as a son, and had taught her to ride, to swim, and to shoot, and had frequently praised her for her skill in archery. She accompanied her father everywhere, even sometimes in petty skirmishing fights, learning to look upon blood and wounds without fear. She was not fond of such sights, however. Her piety was strong, and her best friend was a learned Sadhu who, with her father's approval, instructed her in Vedic lore. Though, when dressed as a boy, she might have been taken for a nobleman's son, yet, naturally enough, she appeared at her best when dressed as a girl. Her figure was slim, straight and supple. Her face was oval in shape, with lustrous brown eyes, a straight rather aquiline nose, rosy cheeks, red lips and a well-rounded chin. The short tresses of her glossy hair were darker than a raven's wing

(2) *The Hunt.*

Meanwhile the Rana and his chieftains made their way at a steady pace towards the broken country amidst the foothills not many miles distant from the city. Scouts had been sent out previously to discover where the wild boars might be found. Having located some, they sent back a messenger with the news, which was most welcome to the Rana, because

a successful hunt on the Ahairea day was a sign of prosperity in the coming year.

Following the guide, the horsemen moved off a couple of miles to the mouth of the ravine in which three or four boars were said to be. The scouts were sitting motionless on the rocky edges of the ravine, waiting until the hunters were ready before they hurled down rocks to drive out the quarry.

The horsemen took up their positions in a wide semicircle. The Rana had the post of honour in the centre, right opposite the mouth of the ravine; Jai Singh, stirred to unusual excitement, was beside him on the right. His brother, however, found himself on the extreme right wing, close to the Thakur of Ghanerao. The ground was rough and broken at this end of the semicircle, and behind Bhim Singh and the Thakur was a long gully full of rocks and bushes. If the boar succeeded in passing his foes he could easily escape through this gully into the open country and outdistance his pursuers altogether.

The Rana gave the signal. The scouts rose to their feet and sent large masses of rock into the ravine from all sides. The noise of these boulders crashing through the bushes was tremendous, and almost immediately there rushed out into the open

a drove of wild boar in which were four enormous hogs. They scattered in all directions.

Bhim Singh was bursting with excitement as he saw one of them speeding towards them. The Thakur put spurs to his horse and charged down upon the boar. So great, however, was the animal's speed that his spear missed it by a few inches. "After him, my lad," shouted the Thakur to Bhim Singh, "and stop him entering that gully."

Turning, they both galloped furiously after it but could not prevent it reaching the gully. The Thakur, being more favourably placed, gained ground faster than Bhim Singh could, and, as soon as he came within striking distance, delivered a mighty thrust at the beast as it rushed through the scrub. He would have speared it without a doubt if a bush had not turned his spear-head aside so that it but grazed the animal's bristling mane. The point wedged itself firmly in a cleft of rock. The Thakur, not wishing to snap his spear-shaft, let go his hold of the spear. As soon as possible he reined in his horse and went back to recover his weapon.

Meanwhile Bhim Singh had gone thundering past and caught sight of the flying quarry as it came out from the bushes. He was so excited that, when he came within a reasonable distance, without think-

ing, he stood up in his stirrups and actually hurled his spear at the beast. He missed his aim, and the spear buried its head in the ground, just in front of the boar. The animal swerved aside and, turning in a short circle, rushed back down the track by which he had come.

Once more Thunderbolt swung round and resumed the mad chase. The boar had a good start. It was quite a hundred yards before Thunderbolt began to overtake him. Bhim Singh looked ahead and to his horror saw the Thakur dismounted and pulling carefully at his spear. He shouted to warn him of his imminent danger. About twenty yards from where the Thakur was standing was an open space free of bushes, and here Bhim Singh trusted to stop the boar. Quickly drawing his heavy javelin from its leather sheath, he spurred Thunderbolt on to yet greater effort. At last his chance came; he must make sure of his quarry before the bushes hid him. Raising aloft his right arm, he hurled the javelin with all his might, and rejoiced to see it buried up to the hilt just behind the beast's shoulder. The boar toppled over, quivered and lay still. The Thakur was warm in his praises of the Prince's skill and very grateful to him, for he knew well that the lad had saved his life.

Meanwhile Jai Singh, in the centre of the line, had his share of excitement and glory. One mighty boar had rushed out of the ravine straight down past the Rana and his son. Both turned their horses at the same moment and furiously charged after it. Jai Singh had the better chance, for he was now to the left of the line of flight. He raced along beside Silver Arrow, and to his utmost satisfaction found himself outstripping the Rana. After a wild gallop for three furlongs he was several paces ahead and couched his spear for a thrust. The boar seemed to know that the spear-point was almost upon him and suddenly swerved across to the left, almost under the nose of his pursuer's steed. Luckily Jai Singh was an expert horseman, and saved Lightning Flash from stumbling over the beast by swerving him aside also to the left and at the same time thrusting hard at the boar. The great speed at which he had been riding made the blow a deadly one. The spear was driven deep into the boar, and there it was left sticking up into the air like a pillar of victory.

"Bravo, Jai Singh! For a beginner that was most skilfully done," cried his father. "Truly your steed is speedier than mine. It is rightly named Lightning Flash. It is a most happy augury for the future, my son. Well done, indeed!" The

Prince's pleasure at these warm words of praise was beyond measure.

The chiefs on the other wing of the semicircle also enjoyed good sport. The two remaining hogs charged right in amongst them, and were hotly chased by forty or fifty horsemen shouting in glee. With so many pursuers the animals had little chance of escape. One was soon killed by a sword-thrust. The other, however, a bigger and a stronger beast than his ill-fated companion, by dodging this way and that through the rock-strewn scrub, eluded his pursuers for nearly a mile. He was seen to be making a wide sweep to the right, evidently hoping to return to the ravine from which he had been driven out. Suddenly he disappeared. It seemed as though the earth had swallowed him up. When the riders reached the spot they found that he must have jumped down into a deep precipitous nullah. It was impossible even for them to ride down the sides, so they separated in order to block up the entrances to the nullah. Then the beaters came up and, by setting fire to the bushes, drove out their prey. Once more the unfortunate creature was dislodged, and, slowly cantering through the bushes towards the right, prepared for a final dash for freedom. It was in vain. No sooner did he come,

forth from the nullah than he received two deadly spear-thrusts in his muscular shoulders.

Some hours were spent in the search for more victims for the hunters' spears, but none was found. And so the day was ended by the customary banquet in the open air beneath some shady trees. Everybody was pleased with the day's sport and full of praise for the exploits of the two Princes, who were the heroes of the hour. The Rana expressed a hope that they might always deal with the foes of Rajasthan as they had dealt with the boars on that memorable day.

CHAPTER III

DISTURBING TIDINGS

ON the last day of the festival in honour of Gouri, about a month later than the Ahairea, there came a messenger to the Rana of Mewar with disturbing news. Rani Korumdevi of Jodhpur had sent a letter imploring Rana Raj Singh's help in her distress, and saying that she was crossing the mountains on her way to Udaipur with her infant son Ajit.

With a strong force of a thousand men the Rana rode out that same night from his city to welcome the distressed queen and to escort her to the shelter she was seeking. By sunrise the next day the Rana crossed the Banas River and met the tired and anxious Rani.

"Welcome to Mewar, fair cousin," said the Rana in gentle tones. "I am right glad to see thee, though, if rumour speak true, the occasion of thy coming is sorrowful. But I see thou art weary and sad. This is not the time nor the place to narrate thy tale of woe. Let us hasten back to the palace in which thou didst spend many happy hours of thy

girlhood. My queens will welcome thee with open arms. When thou art rested and refreshed I will hear thy story."

They returned by easy stages and frequent halts to "the city of the rising sun." There, after Rani Korumdevi had rested and recovered somewhat from the fatigues of her journey, she told her tale. Jai Singh was with his father at the time, and listened with great sympathy to the recital of her troubles. Then, as soon as he could, he slipped away to tell his brother all that he had heard.

He found Bhim Singh returning from a visit to Thunderbolt's stable and took him to the palace garden. There the two brothers walked to and fro hand in hand whilst Jai Singh excitedly narrated the Rani's story as far as he could understand it.

"Well, first of all, you must know that the Rani is now a widow. Rana Jaswant Singh died suddenly in Kabul."

"In Kabul! Whatever was he doing up there?"

"Quelling a rebellion against the Emperor."

"What was the cause of his death?"

"The Rani suspects that he was poisoned at the banquet of victory by order of the Emperor because, so she says, Aurangzeb bore a grudge against him

for helping his brother Dara and opposing him at Fatehabad."

"I cannot believe it. Why should the Emperor murder one of his most capable generals?"

"Well, that is what the Rani believes because, it seems, the Emperor is now trying to get a more direct control over Jodhpur. It appears that, when she was returning with her babe Ajit, he sent soldiers to fetch her to his Court, saying that he wanted to educate the young prince."

"Was the Rani up there with her lord? If she was brave enough to face the cold, why was she not brave enough to burn herself on the funeral pyre?"

"Because she is braver than that. She wants to live to establish her son in his rights as Rana over his father's dominions."

"Yes, brother, that is truly more brave than to become *sati*. But did she not say how she escaped from the Emperor's soldiers?"

"That's the most exciting part of the story. First of all, Aurangzeb tried to bribe her clansmen. He offered them rich fiefs if they would surrender the child. They rejected his offer with scorn. It was after this that the Emperor sent the soldiers with that polite message that did not deceive the Rani."

Then they had a tremendous fight, and the Rani was afraid they would all be killed. So she hid the baby in a basket of sweetmeats and had it secretly carried to a certain Muslim, a faithful friend of her lord, with a request that he would convey the prince to her vassal, Durgadas, who was hurrying to her rescue. This the faithful friend did, and I hope the Emperor will never find it out. Well, after all, though many were killed, the surviving Rahtors cut their way through with their Rani and joined Durgadas's forces. Now she is afraid of the Emperor's vengeance and has come here to seek our help and protection."

"Hurrah," exclaimed Bhim Singh at the end of this long tale, "now we shall have something more exciting than boar-hunts."

"Yes," agreed his brother, "let us hope that, with a few necessary changes, the song of victory I composed will come in useful again."

CHAPTER IV

THE FUGITIVES

THE Rana speedily summoned his council to consider how best to help the Rani of Jodhpur. Everyone was most indignant at the conduct of the Emperor. They soon decided to show him that they would not allow him to act thus against the widow and the son of one who had been his most faithful vassal. Orders were given to certain of the chieftains to raise their feudal levies and then join forces with the Thakur of Ghanerao. An urgent message was sent to Thakur Gopinath to proceed towards Ajmer in order to prevent or, at least, to delay the march of Afzal Khan if, by chance, he was planning to invade Mewar. Meanwhile a strong force, under the command of Prince Bhim Singh, would escort Rani Korumdevi and her son to the stronghold of Kelwa in the Aravallis, where Ajit Singh could be under the immediate care of the brave Durgadas, and from which the Rani could rouse her own clansmen to stout resistance.

When these orders became known to all, Jai Singh congratulated his brother, saying, "Ho, Bhim, you are lucky. I quite envy you."

"You may well do so," replied Bhim. "I hope I carry out my first important task with success. It is an honour that should have been yours, Jai."

"No, brother, you are better fitted for it than I. Acquit yourself well."

"Thank you for your good wishes. I can but do my best."

Very early the next morning Bhim Singh was in the palace courtyard awaiting Rani Korumdevi and her attendants. Drawn up in line behind him was the small Rahtor escort of fifty men who were to form the Rani's immediate body-guard. Four palkis with their sturdy bearers were in readiness by the inner portal. Within a short time the Rana came out of the palace leading the Rani of Jodhpur by the hand.

From the balcony above, the ladies of his Rawula or Zanana watched the departure. There had been a tender leave-taking between the queens, and Korumdevi was much strengthened and comforted by the sympathy and encouragement shown to her.

The Prince and the Rahtors saluted with their swords. The Rani was handed into her palki by

the Rana, her infant was placed in her lap; the Rana bowed low and the curtain dropped. Meanwhile the Rani's women had entered the other palkis. The bearers took them up and set forth at a good pace, the escort falling into position on all sides.

The thousand horsemen who were to accompany the Rani to her destination were drawn up on the great terrace in front of the palace. Their salutes were acknowledged by Prince Bhim as he rode alongside the Rani's palki. He looked very handsome with the peacock plume gracefully waving in his gold-laced turban. His charger Thunderbolt was tossing his head as if to say, "This is a gallant prince I bear on my back, and one who will do famous deeds." Thus did the Queen of Jodhpur set forth once more on her journeying.

The Prince arranged his troops skilfully. Scouts were sent out far in advance and the flanks and rear were well guarded. Bhim Singh was careful not to be taken by surprise, because the Rani firmly believed that Afzal Khan was determined to capture her. No risks, therefore, were taken, and the Rana had ordered him to avoid fighting if possible until Rani Korumdevi and little Ajit were safely lodged in Kelwa Fort.

They moved quickly over the wide plain beyond the circle of hills that enclosed the fertile valley of Udaipur. And when they reached rougher ground with many irregular ridges to cross, they changed the palki-bearers more frequently.

Two hours before noon on the second day, they ascended a ridge about four hundred feet in height. The top of this ridge was a small tableland with two little lakes and many shady trees. Just by one side of it flowed the River Banas. The Prince thought it better to cross the river before they halted for their mid-day meal. The chieftain of Delwara, in whose territory they now were, had sent his tents for the use of the Rani. Bhim Singh gave the order to pitch these tents by the river-side under some trees.

But just when they were enjoying their mid-day rest, a horseman came dashing into their camp with the news that a party of fugitives with three elephants and sixty horsemen was rapidly drawing near, accompanied by some of the advance scouts.

In a moment everyone was astir and very soon the fugitives were seen. Prince Bhim rode out to meet them. He saw from the five-coloured flag carried by the leader of the escort that they were Kachhwahas from Jaipur, and from him he learnt that the women on the elephant were the Princess

of Amber and her attendant, bearing a letter for the Rani of Jodhpur. Then, under the peepul tree in the midst of the camp, the elephant was made to kneel so that the Prince might assist the two veiled figures to step down to the ground. He led them to the Rani's tents.

After a short while the Prince was summoned to attend the Rani. In a tent set apart for dining he found her and the two new-comers. The attendant was elderly, but the Princess was a girl of fifteen who, after one quick glance at the Prince, shyly looked down upon the ground. The young man bowed to the Rani and then to the girl.

The Rani held in her hand an open letter. There were tears in her eyes as she read it to the Prince.

“Maharani,” it said, “may all the blessings of Sri Krishna wait upon you, and may Siva, Lord of heaven, destroy your foes. Great sorrow, alas! has befallen Amber. My noble husband is dead. He died in the distant Deccan, of fever it is reported, but I strongly fear he was treacherously put to death by poison. He was ever careless of his food and drink. When you read this I shall have mounted the pyre to join my beloved in Indra's heaven. Had I a son I should have lived for his

sake. But now I depart and commit my daughter, Ambalika, to your keeping to nurture her as your own and, when troublous times have passed, to wed her to some noble lord. The daughter of the Kachhwahas comes not empty-handed. Jewels and costly robes I send with her for her wedding day. Let your arm be strengthened for her safety.

“Farewell,

“JODHBAI, THE HEARTBROKEN.”

During the reading of this sad letter, Bhim Singh stole many glances at Princess Ambalika. She was small but very beautiful. Her face was like that of a child, with sweet regular features and a golden olive complexion. Her brown eyes were large and soft. Her glossy tresses, slipping down beneath her richly embroidered scarf, fell upon a shapely neck. She was like a beautiful picture. The Prince pitied her sad condition, bereft of both parents, and looked lovingly upon her.

Meanwhile a lad had been standing at the tent door awaiting permission to enter. Across his shoulders he carried a bow and a quiver full of arrows; other weapons he had none. His sharp eyes had seen the looks of love that the Prince had

directed towards the beautiful girl. He gave a sigh.

Hearing this, the Prince looked up and beckoned the lad to enter. He came in with a soldierly salute and placed a note bearing Ghanerao's seal in the Prince's hand. The Prince, with the Rani's permission, read the note. He was startled at the contents and told the Rani that bad news had come. They must, he said, leave the place immediately and hurry on their journey. Whilst she made ready for departure, he would confer with the leaders of his troops.

CHAPTER V

A NIGHT ATTACK

GLANCING keenly at the lad, whose face seemed somehow familiar to him, Bhim Singh bade him follow, and summoned the three chieftains to a conference. He was astonished to learn from the Thakur's note that the "lad" who brought it was his daughter Premabai. Seeing the Prince's look of astonishment, Premabai explained that, when she accompanied her father on his journeys, she always dressed as a lad for the sake of convenience.

The note was a short one, saying that Afzal Khan, with a force of five or six thousand men, was advancing rapidly towards the Banas, and that Dilir Khan, after attacking Durgadas in Marwar territory, was retreating towards Ajmer. It seemed clear that Dilir Khan, having discovered where the Rani of Jodhpur really was, intended to join Afzal Khan in his swift raid. The Thakur, in conclusion, wrote that he was harassing the enemy, and would hold them back with his small force of nine hundred men as long as he could.

"What a pity," said the Prince, "that my father ordered me to avoid a fight. But how can we avoid it? I wish Afzal Khan had come later, after we had placed the Rani in safety."

Thereupon Premabai said hesitatingly, "Prince, if a girl may presume to advise warriors, I have a plan that may succeed. Send the Rani and her people with the elephants along this bank of the Banas towards the hills under the shelter of the woods. Meanwhile, with seven hundred men we shall take the palkis over the river to the high ridge yonder. We shall take care to be seen moving towards the plains leading to the Debari Pass. The enemy will pursue us. Now, six miles away there is, as you know, a deep ravine in which we may hide. As they pursue us, twisting and turning amidst the ridges, they will be sharply attacked by small bodies of our men from each flank. So they are sure to halt because it will be too dangerous for them to enter our valley in the darkness. Then some of us can creep into their camp, cut loose their horses and drive them out in confusion, whilst others will charge furiously upon them, thus disturbed, and put them to slaughter or to headlong flight."

The three chieftains agreed that Premabai's plan was excellent. So the Prince gave the necessary

orders, though he was sorry to be separating himself from the company of the Rani and Princess Ambalika. He wondered when he should see them again. The Rani's own body-guard and three hundred men, under the Bedla chieftain, were ordered to escort the fugitives to Kelwa by a roundabout and more difficult route.

Then, after seeing them start off, Bhim Singh and his company recrossed the river. They moved slowly with the palkis along the ridge until they were seen by the enemy's scouts. After that, they descended the ridge rapidly, and separated into three parties, two of which rode off to right and to left respectively whilst the main body, under Bhim Singh, kept steadily on towards the hidden ravine. These flanking parties kept out of sight until Afzal Khan's troops were pressing very closely on the heels of Bhim Singh's force. Then they charged down furiously on either side and drove the enemy back.

Darkness was rapidly falling, but whilst there still remained enough light for the enemy to see them, Bhim Singh left the palkis in the rough scrub about two miles from the ravine. Afzal Khan and his men approached them very cautiously because they feared a trap. They guessed that the palkis were

empty, but it was necessary to make sure that nobody was lying in ambush near them.

As it had become quite dark by this time, the Muslim leader decided to bivouac for the night and to search for the fugitives the next morning. His horses were tired and his men also needed a good rest. He knew that the Rajputs whom he had been pursuing were comparatively few in number.

Meanwhile, in the ravine, which all the Rajput parties had now reached safely, they were eagerly discussing who was to be sent into the enemy's camp to let loose and frighten their horses. Premabai said, "Prince, it was I who thought of the plan, so I should be chosen to carry it out."

"Nay," replied the Prince, "it is too dangerous for you. What will your father say to me if you are lost? Shall seven hundred soldiers hold back whilst a girl risks her life! It is not to be thought of."

"Consider, Prince," quickly replied the Thakur's daughter, "the danger is not great. Who can crawl through the grass like a snake as I can? Your soldiers are excellent riders but are clumsy in their movements on foot. If they accidentally arouse the enemy too soon our plan will fail. Besides I shall take care not to expose myself to any risk."

"Well, then, I shall come with you."

"No, Prince, it is more fitting that you should lead the attack when I give the signal from the enemy's camp."

After a little more argument, the Prince agreed that Premabai, accompanied by one trooper, should carry through the first part of her plan.

So, arming herself with a sharp knife and accompanied by a stalwart Rajput, Premabai set out on foot into the darkness towards the enemy's camp-fires. The horsemen followed after a short interval and took up positions on two sides of the enemy.

Guiding themselves by the light of the distant fires, Premabai and her companion moved stealthily through the line of pickets. More than once they were challenged. At such moments they stood perfectly motionless for a while. The sentries, not being able to see anything, thought the noise came from some wild creature on the prowl for food.

Guided by the occasional stamp of a horse's hoof, Premabai and her companion wriggled themselves along through the grass to the picketing-lines. They could see by the uncertain light of the camp-fires that there were about seven hundred horses tethered at this part of the camp. Where the other horses were they could not find out.

Only two men had been put here on guard. One, however, was lying full length on the ground and snoring almost within an arm's length of them, the other was moving slowly up and down the lines. Premabai's companion stabbed the sleeper to death with one swift blow of his dagger and then waited for the other guard to approach.

In due course the unsuspecting man came to the trooper lying down and, stooping, shook him roughly, saying, "Wake up, Abdul Karim, it's your turn to tramp up and down. I am utterly weary." Those were the last words he ever spoke. From out of the darkness a strong hand clutched him by the throat and rolled him over for the dagger to pierce his heart.

Swiftly arising, Premabai and the trooper ran along the lines cutting the tethering ropes. When they had released about three hundred horses they shouted and yelled; then they beat the animals so vigorously that they soon galloped off in a wild stampede. Many of those still tethered dragged up the stakes in their excitement and terror. Away they rushed madly through the camp. When Bhim Singh heard the noise and the shouting of the rudely-awakened Muslims, he gave the signal for the attack.

Afzal Khan heard this signal in the distance and, summoning his bodyguard, rushed to the horses that had not been set loose by Premabai and her companion. Untethering and mounting these, the Muslim leader led his men against the onrushing Rajputs as they swept through the camp. But he was caught between two attacking forces and was obliged to give way. He charged again, but, not being able to rally enough of his men to save his camp, determined to save his life and the lives of those around him by immediate retreat. In due time he would be able to get his revenge.

CHAPTER VI

A NEW DANGER

AFZAL KHAN, with the survivors of the fierce night attack, rode rapidly northwards to join Dilir Khan, who was moving to meet him. But by this time the feudal levies of Mewar were in the field, and compelled Dilir Khan to retreat by going beyond his main force, cutting off his supplies from Ajmer and harassing his foraging parties. The Emperor had ordered his generals to capture the fugitive Rani as soon as possible. They had tried and failed and, not being strong enough to make war upon Mewar and Marwar together, they retired to Ajmer to await further orders from Delhi.

There were great rejoicings in Udaipur when the news of their retreat was announced. The streets were brilliantly illuminated, and the people enjoyed a holiday. The Rana rode out in solemn procession to the shrine of Eklinga to return thanks for these victories.

The blowing of conch-shells and the rattle of kettle-drums told the assembled multitude when

the worship was over and when the Rana was about to come forth from the sacred place. As soon as they saw him, they raised a mighty shout, "Victory to our Rana." The return procession was about to begin when the Rana was humbly approached by a deputation of Brahmans. Their leader stepped forward and addressed him as he was preparing to ascend into the howdah.

"Maharana," he said, "protector of the poor and shield of the Gods, ill news has come to us from our brethren in Agra and Muttra and the sacred soil of Vraj. The ruler of Delhi has decreed the Jizya upon all who follow not Islam; his officers are carrying out his orders with overmuch zeal and are seizing from our harmless Hindu brothers many times the value of this poll-tax. Would that the benign Akbar were still upon the throne! Some demon possesses the body of our Emperor. For we learn that in the distant provinces he has proscribed our faith, is demolishing our images and destroying our temples. Soon, we fear, this spirit of destruction will visit Vraj. Great Krishna is in peril. The gentle God must again seek safely in flight. To thy strong arm, defender of our ancient faith, we look for protection."

All who heard these words were angered, and placed their hands upon the hilts of their swords as if to draw them in defence of their religion. Slowly and thoughtfully the Rana spoke. "O Brahmans, truly Aurangzeb is looking for great sorrow. We have but now chased his generals from the field. It seems we must carry the war into his own provinces. But, before that is done, I shall send a letter of remonstrance by the hand of my trusty son, Bhim Singh, to turn the Emperor from his evil courses. Prince Jai Singh shall lead an army to rescue the flute-playing God and bring him to the sanctuary of our strong city."

Without more words the Rana mounted the elephant, and the stately procession set forth on its homeward journey.

"Did you hear what our father spoke, Jai?" said his brother as he rode along by his side in the slow-moving procession. "It is your turn for an adventure now. I am very glad."

"Yes, I heard his words, and I am much excited. We are lucky to have such tasks to perform at our age."

"Indeed we are! I have heard the Emperor's Court is a very grand place. I want to see the Peacock Throne."

"Well, Bhim, I hope you will not see too much of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to say that it is easy enough to enter the Mughal Court with a letter but not so easy to come away when Aurangzeb finds out about God Krishna's escape."

"Oh, you think he will hold me prisoner."

"Yes, I do, unless your mission is completed before mine is begun."

"I never thought of that. But, come what may, we shall have to obey orders. If there are risks to run, so much the better."

Their conversation was interrupted at this point by the music. They finished the journey in silence, each busy with his own thoughts of the stirring adventures to come.

The next day the Rana summoned his two sons to a council with the chief nobles and the ministers in order to decide upon their course of action against this new danger to peace. "The letter of protest," he said, "I shall compose with the aid of my hereditary chief councillor, the Rawat of Salumbar. We need not discuss that. But what we must determine is when to send Jai Singh with the army to Muttra and whether to send the letter first. If

we do that, the Emperor will just be put on his guard and demolish the image before we can rescue it, because the rainy season will soon be upon us and seriously hinder the rapid movement of our troops. If, on the other hand, we do not allow Bhim Singh to finish his mission before the army sets out, then it is likely that he will be detained as a prisoner. What do you advise, Rutten Singh? ”

Chondawat Rawat Rutten Singh of Salumbar, whose advice the Rana sought, after a few moments of deliberation, replied, “ Maharana, Prince Bhim must face the risk; he will welcome danger. We have good proof of that. My advice is that the letter be delivered before the rescue of God Krishna is attempted. In the letter you should say, however, that Prince Bhim is only a messenger, to be followed, after a short interval, by his brother bringing the Mewar contingent for a year’s service at the Court. You must apologise for having neglected to send a contingent for some years past, but you will add that, to make up for your past remissness, you are now sending twice the usual number under the command of your heir-apparent himself. Thus it may happen that the Emperor will dismiss Prince Bhim before our real designs are known, and Prince Jai will be able to approach Muttra without raising

undue suspicions in the mind of the Nawab of that city."

This advice being warmly approved by all, the Rana decided to send the two young men on their respective missions in the month of Aswija.

CHAPTER VII

THE LETTER IS DELIVERED

AFTER the council meeting the Rana took his two sons aside into a small room adjoining the council chamber.

“Bhim,” said he, “I wish you to go to Kelwa Fort to ask after the welfare of the Rani of Jodhpur, and to tell her, under bond of secrecy, what we have determined to do. You are to warn her that, in the coming winter season, I may call upon her to aid us by taking the field against the Muslims. You will meet her famous general, Durgadas, and from him you will learn much of the art of war because he is as wise and skilful as he is brave. Make yourself acquainted with the Aravalli hills. Sooner or later, the Emperor will attack us, and, if he comes with strong armies, we shall retire to our mountain fastnesses and lure him on to follow us. He will find it difficult to drag his guns into the hills, where we, moreover, may hope to capture some of them. Until we do so, we shall be at a disadvantage fighting against him on the plains. This is your task during

these months of waiting before you ride to Delhi. Now go and prepare for your journey whilst I discuss with your brother the best route for the God's journey from Muttra to my dominions."

The delighted Prince thanked his father and took leave of him courteously. He then turned aside and bade farewell to his brother, who exclaimed in astonishment, "Shall I not see you before you set out, brother? Surely you are in great haste!"

"Yes, Jai, I am, and all that you will see of me after this moment will be the dust raised by Thunderbolt's hoofs."

"A very dutiful son!" said the Rana as the young man strode from the chamber.

"Very dutiful indeed," thought Jai within himself, "but when duty and pleasure are combined a fellow will not dawdle." For Jai had guessed his brother's secret, though Bhim had not told him much about the fugitives from Amber.

A few days before the time fixed for his departure to Delhi, Prince Bhim returned in a very joyful mood. He had faithfully carried out his father's instructions and now felt ready for any enterprise, however absurd or dangerous it might be. His father was pleased with his spirit, but exhorted him to exercise caution and prudence when he found himself at the Mughal

Court, for, otherwise, all his newly-acquired knowledge of the Aravallis would be useless. The Rana did not hide from him the likelihood, unless fate were very kind, of his being held as a prisoner. He must then use his wits to escape or else he would miss the excitement of the coming war. Bhim Singh promised to curb his high spirits and to be as cautious as a prime minister.

Early in the month of Aswija, then, Bhim Singh found himself approaching the imperial city with his small escort. His brother was to follow seven days later with his force of fifteen thousand swords, but, after passing through Amber, was to turn aside from the direct road to Delhi to make his dash upon Muttra.

Tidings of the Prince's coming were sent on ahead of him by the Emperor's secret newswriters, who were posted in every district. They also declared the object of his visit, for the Rajputs made no secret of it.

Bhim Singh, therefore, was met outside the city walls by Raja Shiam Singh of Bikaner, who had been sent out by the Emperor to welcome him. After courteous greetings Raja Shiam Singh said to the Prince, "So, after all, your noble father is sending the customary contingent for the service

of the Emperor. Your brother will have many chances to distinguish himself, for Alamgir is in a warlike mood and the Deccan will soon feel his heavy hand. What about yourself? Will you not be staying also to win glory as a soldier of fortune? The Emperor has heard of your exploits against Afzal Khan. He appreciates bravery, but much prefers it to be shown in his service and not against him. Much depends upon your demeanour, Prince, in the next month; Alamgir will forgive you for your rescue of the runaway Rani if he takes a liking to you."

"In the next month!" exclaimed Bhim Singh rather taken aback by the words. "Surely he will receive my father's letter to-morrow, will he not?"

"'Tis very little you know about the Imperial Court—that's evident," laughingly replied the Raja. "You will be lucky indeed if you are called to the Presence within a month!"

"I am no courtier," said the Prince, "to love dallying about in idle luxury. Within seven days I shall have seen all that I want to see here, especially, of course, the far-famed Peacock Throne; within that time I must secure an audience; surely it can be arranged?"

"Well, Prince," replied the Raja good-naturedly, "since you are in such a hurry I will see what I can do, for I am in favour now with Aurangzeb."

Proceeding through the suburbs. they passed many handsome houses and gardens belonging to amirs and mansabdars, and entered the city by the Delhi gate. They then passed down a long bazaar, and soon on their left there came into view the magnificent Jumma Musjid, a glorious building in red sandstone and marble. Bhim Singh stayed for a moment to admire its marble domes and gold-tipped spires. Leaving that spot, the Raja led the way to the great square in front of the fortress, pausing before the Lahore Gate to show the Prince the long broad street, the Chandni Chowk, with its arcaded shops on either side, that ran straight through the centre of the city from this grand gateway.

Thus at last they came to the Raja's tents at the northern end of the square. It was Bikaner's turn to mount guard for a week with his contingent. Quarters were assigned to the officer of the guard within the citadel itself, but the Rajputs preferred to have their own camp outside its walls.

Though Raja Shiam Singh did his best to secure the imperial summons to an audience, it was not until the fifth day that it came. The Raja was

instructed to bring the young Prince to the Diwan-i-Am on the following morning.

Accordingly, shortly before noon the next day, the Prince and his men were conducted by the Raja to the citadel. Passing through the Lahore Gate, they found themselves in a long vaulted arcade, their horses' hoofs making the lofty roof echo loudly. Leaving this, they entered a large courtyard, in the centre of which was a tank. From this tank ran small canals passing straight down two streets to right and to left of the courtyard. Glancing down these streets, the Prince saw pretty little houses and alcoves with fountains and gardens with all kinds of flowering shrubs. These were the quarters of the amirs and other imperial officers.

They crossed the courtyard to the great gateway, above which was the Nakkar Khana or musicians' gallery. Beneath this gate they dismounted. None but princes of the royal blood might ride beyond it. Here they left the escort except two men who were to follow them bearing gifts, for no ambassador ever approached the Presence without an offering. They then crossed the spacious inner court to the noble hall of public audience, the Diwan-i-Am.

Raised considerably from the ground, this beautiful hall was open on the three sides looking into the

court. It was light and airy. The ceiling and the several rows of pillars with fine arches between them, painted and overlaid with gold, could thus be seen very clearly. At the upper end of the hall, in a wide and lofty opening higher from the floor than a man could reach, sat the Emperor on his throne.

At the right and left of the monarch, beneath lofty red velvet umbrellas embroidered and fringed all round with pearls, stood some of his sons. Servants standing about him were keeping away the flies with peacocks' tails, and cooling the air by waving large fans.

Aurangzeb was dressed in a white, gold-embroidered satin robe of the finest texture. In the front of his turban of gold cloth was a splendid ornament of diamonds, in the midst of which a huge topaz shone like the sun. Around his neck was a rope of immense pearls hanging down into his lap. Bhim Singh could not help admiring him in spite of his cold and stern look.

Raja Shiam Singh and Prince Bhim approached noiselessly over the immense rich silk carpets that covered the marble floor. They mounted the steps to the platform surrounded by a silver railing at the foot of the throne. Here were assembled the amirs and rajas in splendid attire, all standing, their

eyes bent downward and their hands crossed. At a greater distance from the throne stood the mansabdars and lesser officials, also in the same posture of great reverence.

The Raja of Bikaner salaamed profoundly thrice. Bhim Singh followed his example.

"Huzur," said the Raja in a loud clear voice, "I have brought my fellow-countryman according to your gracious command to the Presence. Prince Bhim Singh of Udaipur brings with him a letter and gifts from Rana Raj Singh to the Imperial Majesty."

In his confusion the Prince stepped forward and seemed about to hand up the letter directly to the Emperor himself. He was prevented by an amir who stepped forward and received it. A servant was bidden to take it up. The Emperor took it with every mark of respect and then, without breaking the seals, caused it to be handed down to his Grand Vizier, who sat on a marble seat on the platform just below the throne.

This done, the Emperor gave a sign that the Raja's gifts might be brought. At a nod from Raja Shiam Singh, who had taken his usual place amongst the attendant rajas, the two Rajput followers mounted on to the platform, salaamed deeply and handed

the gifts to the Prince. They were enamelled vases of the best Amber workmanship, a ruby and a diamond of price, and a richly-inlaid dagger so cunningly made that, on the pressing of a spring in the handle, it opened out into three deadly blades of the finest steel. These gifts were handed up to the Emperor, who examined them carefully and praised them highly.

Then, at a sign from the throne, two amirs came forward and put on the Prince a vest of rich brocade, a turban and a girdle sash of embroidered silk. His own turban with its peacock plume was handed back to one of the Rajput gift-bearers. Raja Shiam Singh motioned to the Prince to come and take his place by his side, whilst his two attendants should withdraw. With profound salaams they moved backwards from before the throne, the Prince to a place on the right of the platform and the two men to the bottom of the hall where the crowd of retainers was.

For one hour more the durbar lasted. The royal horses and elephants were first paraded in front of the Emperor. Then other animals were introduced; tame antelopes kept for the purpose of fighting each other; large Bengal buffaloes with great horns that enabled them to contend against

lions and tigers; tame hunting cheetahs; sporting dogs covered with red cloth, and, lastly, hawks and falcons of all kinds.

When this parade was over, the Emperor rose and passed out of the hall into his private apartments behind it, accompanied by his sons and servants. The durbar was at an end. An officer of the household advanced and conducted the Prince to the quarters that had been allotted to him in the fort near the Delhi gate.



Raja Bhim Singhji
(1653-1695)

From a portrait graciously lent by H.H. the Raja of Banera)

CHAPTER VIII

PRINCE BHIM FINDS HIMSELF A PRISONER

THE next morning Bhim Singh left the pleasant little house assigned to him in the citadel, intending to proceed to the Raja of Bikaner's tents outside the Lahore Gate. He wished to learn from him in what manner he should take leave of the Emperor now that his business was done. But, when he reached the gate, the guards turned him back courteously but firmly. They told him that an ambassador's life was very precious in the Emperor's eyes, and that it was against etiquette for such an honourable personage to venture alone into the dangerous streets. He returned to his quarters grumbling at this check upon his liberty.

Shortly after mid-day, however, he met the Raja as he was changing the guards within the citadel and told him what had happened. The Raja laughed and said, "You have yet much to learn of Court etiquette. Of course, having been given quarters here, you are not expected to go forth unless properly attended. The guards were quite

right; ambassadors have valuable lives. I doubt whether you will be summoned to an audience for leave-taking until your brother has arrived."

"H'm," said Bhim Singh, "that means I shall never get away, because my brother is not coming."

"What is that you are saying?" exclaimed the Raja in astonishment. "Your brother is not coming!"

Thereupon the Prince explained everything to his friend, who looked very grave as he listened to the tale. "A letter of remonstrance to the proud Mughal and a rescue of a God from one of his chief cities! Well, you are indeed a bold young man to walk right into the lion's den! If you do not get out of this place before news of your brother's doings reaches the imperial ear, may Vishnu preserve you!"

"I had hoped to be dismissed before that happened, but I suppose His Majesty dislikes being remonstrated with about his actions, however politely it be done."

"'Dislike' is a mild word to use, Prince. Aurangzeb hates criticism, and can be very obstinate against good advice. Enough of that. Let us rather plan your escape. Obviously you can leave here only in disguise, and even then your handsome face may betray you. Send one of your two personal servants to my camp. I shall give him a false beard and

moustaches and a trooper's uniform for you to wear. Then you will pass out unchallenged.

The Prince thanked his friend and said he was sorry to expose him to the risk of discovery. The Raja declared that there was no fear of that, and that he would be very sorry indeed if such a fine young man should be shut up indefinitely in some horrible dungeon.

Comforted by this conversation, Bhim Singh wandered about leisurely for some time. But, on his return to his house, he was dismayed to learn that his two Rajput servants had been sent out to rejoin the rest of his escort, and their places had been taken by two Muhammadans. He determined to complain about this to his friend the Raja when he came again on his evening round of inspection.

But, alas, when the Prince sallied out again in the evening, he found that the Rajput guards had been replaced by others, and on enquiry he learnt that the Raja of Bikaner had received orders immediately to take his contingent to the garrison of Lahore. It seemed abundantly clear to the young man that, if he escaped at all, he would have to depend upon himself alone.

For several days Prince Bhim was left to his own devices, though one or two of the amirs who had

quarters near his own took pity on the lonely young man and came for a friendly chat with him. One of them invited Bhim Singh to accompany him to the great courtyard to watch the ceremonial setting forth of the Emperor to say prayers in the Mosque, which he did on each Friday. But no official notice was taken of him, and he began to wonder if he had been forgotten.

Then, one morning, he received a formal visit from Sultan Muhammad Akbar, one of the Emperor's sons. Aurangzeb had instructed his son to win his way into the Rajput's confidence to discover how much he knew of what was happening, and of the terms of the Rana's letter. The Emperor wished to know whether he was a simple-minded fellow, a mere messenger, or whether he was a very bold and fearless young man who might be induced later on to take service in the imperial armies. As Muhammad Akbar was born of a Rajput princess, the Emperor judged him the fittest person for the task.

After formal greetings, Akbar, in order to catch him off his guard, suddenly gave out the news of Jai Singh's successful accomplishment of his mission. Keenly watching Bhim Singh's face, Akbar noticed the look of pleasure that flashed across it before

Bhim Singh could control his feelings and assume a look of astonishment.

"What is this you are telling me, Sultan Akbar? Jai Singh went off to Muttra to steal a god's image and is not coming here after all!" he exclaimed with pretended bewilderment. "On what mad impulse did he act?"

"Whether your brother, Prince, acted on a sudden impulse, urged on by the frightened Brahman priests, or whether the whole affair was plotted by your father, you must know best. Your brother rode into Muttra to pay his respects to the Nawab of that city, and during the night God Krishna's image and one other were secretly removed. The next morning, before sunrise, your brother left without any formal leave-taking. When the Nawab heard of this, he rode out with a small force, was misdirected as to the route taken by the Rajputs, and came upon the image of the other deity. This he recaptured and brought back with him. And now he awaits my august father's orders." *grat*

"It looks as if Jai Singh has betrayed me. Look at my predicament—left here to be a prisoner or a hostage in the Emperor's hands. Surely you must admit that, if my father had plotted this, he might have chosen a less clumsy method."

Remembering the fleeting look of triumph that he had noticed in Bhim Singh's face, Akbar was not deceived. Nevertheless he continued, "Truly, it was a clumsy method and looks like treachery to you. Had you not better consider cutting loose from home ties and taking up service with us? There is great scope for an ambitious man. Look at the high rank and favour shown to Raja Shiam Singh. You are a fighting man, and we can give you plenty of that in the Deccan."

Bhim Singh thought it prudent to seem willing to consider the matter, but asked for time in which to do so. Really, of course, he wanted to gain time to plan his escape. He had no immediate intention of taking service under the Emperor until Aurangzeb had come to some honourable agreement with the Rajputs and ceased his intrigues against their ruling families. Acknowledging that the Prince's request was reasonable, Sultan Muhammad Akbar took his leave and so brought to an end the first of many visits.

CHAPTER IX

PRINCE BHIM ESCAPES

THIS interview with Bhim Singh was immediately reported to the Emperor by his son, who assured him that, in his opinion, the Prince was in the plot. The young man, he continued, pretended ignorance of the Rana's plans, and implied that he had been betrayed into their hands by his brother, Jai Singh.

"That is your first impression, Akbar, and you may be mistaken," said his father. "Find out whether the brothers are good friends; it may be that Jai Singh wants to get rid of a possible rival to his own claims to the gadi. If Bhim Singh is in the plot, he is a very bold young man to come here and risk imprisonment, perhaps for life. If, on the other hand, he was ignorant of the plot, he must be rather dull-witted in State affairs, though we know him to be brave and skilful in fighting. In either case we should win him over to take service in our armies. We shall treat him well at present, though he will not be allowed to leave the fort."

And so Akbar continued his visits, and soon became very friendly with his father's prisoner-guest. The two had many interests in common though Akbar was about ten years older than the Prince. Bhim Singh still pretended to think himself ill-used by his brother, and still continued to express surprise that his father had used such clumsy methods, if he had, indeed, planned the whole affair and deceived the Emperor purposely. Perhaps, he suggested, the Rana would write an explanation with apologies.

Such remarks amused Sultan Akbar, who thought it very improbable that the Rana would do any such thing. "We shall wait and see, Prince, but if your father offers no satisfactory explanation, the Emperor will set out to 'visit' him with an army or two. Meanwhile you will sit here and lose the excitement of the next few months. When a treaty of peace is concluded and indemnities are paid, you can take service here, for you did but obey your father's orders and the Emperor bears no malice against you."

Bhim Singh, not yet having found a way of escape, and finding Akbar's company very entertaining, saw no reason on his part to be surly and unfriendly. The two friends talked of horses, of dogs, of falcons and of all the various forms of sport. Bhim Singh

narrated the story of his first boar-hunt, and Akbar in turn told how he had killed his first tiger.

"Now tell me, Akbar, of your most thrilling adventure," the Prince begged of his friend one day.

"My most thrilling adventure," replied Akbar, "happened years ago, when I was a boy. There was a great elephant fight arranged on the sandy stretch of ground between the palace and the river bank. My brothers and I, being small boys, were told to watch it from the upper balconies. But we could not really see very well from there and so we ran down and mounted our ponies. Well, I became so interested in the fight that I unwittingly rode too near. The elephant that was getting the worst of the encounter saw me, left off fighting and dashed madly at me. I can still see the frightened mahout, lying on the hindquarters of the beast and clinging to the rope that passed round its back, dig his iron spike into the creature. But blows and shouts were of no avail. Meanwhile my pony and I stood rooted to the spot in terror. Then I seemed to wake up and became full of fury. I dug my heels into my pony's side and charged the monster. It was sheer madness on my part. I hurled my little dagger at the beast's trunk and

missed my aim. The next moment my pony and I were rolling over in the sand. Luckily for me, the elephant had twined his trunk round my pony's legs and not round me. If the poor pony had not fallen between me and the monster I should not now be alive to tell the tale. Curiously enough, I was not frightened, but full of mad rage at seeing my beloved little pony gored to death. I pulled out my little sword and just as the elephant was about to kneel and crush the pony I slashed at the soft part of his uplifted trunk. The pain of this made the enraged monster scream loudly and wheel about to engage his former foe, who had come lumbering after him."

Bhim Singh's eyes glistened with excitement as he listened to this stirring tale.

"Akbar!" he exclaimed, "my Rajputs call me brave, but your courage was tremendous! I should have fled."

"Then," rejoined Akbar, "you would have been killed. A pony is no match in speed for a madly-infuriated elephant."

"Have you ever hunted the lion, Akbar?" asked Bhim Singh, after a pause. "They say that a lion is a more formidable foe than a tiger, who, after all, is a cowardly beast."

"No, never," replied Akbar. "Lion-hunting as arranged by the imperial shikaris is a mild affair. There is no sport in it and no danger. The poor beast has no chance. The bait is drugged with opium; the lion gets drowsy; a net is drawn around his lair. My father comes up on an elephant. The sleepy lion, prodded with long spikes, wakes up and, roaring, springs at him, but is entangled in the net and so is easily shot down. I call it butchery, not sport."

On another occasion, Akbar, at Bhim Singh's request, showed him the Diwan-i-Khas, the hall of private audience, the beauty of which greatly impressed him. They stepped lightly over the marble pavement of the inner court and entered the hall. Built of white marble, with a ceiling of silver, it was a worthy hall in which to place the Peacock Throne. The first sight of this struck Bhim Singh dumb with amazement. Never in his life had he dreamed of such a marvellous work of art.

The high and massy feet of the throne were of solid gold; on them and the bars and panels sparkled diamonds, crimson rubies, green emeralds, and dark blue sapphires set in various patterns. The gilded canopy was supported by pillars wreathed in pearls. On the top of the canopy was a jewelled peacock

whose body was made of solid gold inlaid with precious stones. Its tail, spread out like a fan, was made to look very natural with an incredible number of blue sapphires and other coloured stones. On either side, the same height as the bird, stood two bunches of flowers made of gold inlaid with precious stones.

“Perfectly wonderful!” exclaimed Bhim Singh at last. “I am glad I gave the Rana’s gifts before I saw this marvel. I should otherwise have felt shame at giving such trifles to a master of such wealth.”

“But consider, Prince,” rejoined Akbar, “this throne was not built in one day, but gradually, and your father’s ruby and diamond will probably find a place on it. Jewels are always welcome to my father.”

“I am glad to hear that,” replied Bhim Singh, “but please translate for me those Persian words over the arches at the two ends of the hall.”

“Willingly,” answered Akbar. “The inscription means something as follows: ‘If on the earth there is any paradise, it is this, oh! it is this, oh! it is this!’”

Then, after giving his friend a glimpse at the Emperor’s lovely marble Moti Masjid or “Pearl Mosque,” the domes of which were covered with

gilded copper plates, Akbar took his leave of him for the day.

Bhim Singh was much impressed by the Emperor's devotion to his faith and zeal for religion. For lack of better occupation that evening he spoke about this to one of his two Muhammadan attendants, but he found that this man, Muhammad Ali by name, was a Shiah who did not at all approve of his imperial master's strict Sunni orthodoxy. Indeed, he gradually grew eloquent about the grievances of his sect, and explained how they had to behave themselves as Sunnis to avoid being dismissed from service. The happy comfortable days at Court had gone. It was even becoming doubtful whether the Emperor might not prohibit the coming Muharram procession.

Bhim Singh pricked up his ears. An idea had darted into his mind. Here was his chance to escape if only he could get a suitable disguise. Very carefully he tested the attendant. He offered him two rich jewels which the Emperor had presented to him by the hand of his son. Muhammad Ali, realising that the sale of these jewels would keep him in luxury for the rest of his life and enable him to travel far out of the Emperor's clutches, consented to help him.

Through this man Bhim Singh was at last enabled to get into touch with Jagat Singh, the captain of his Ranawat escort. He learnt that they had been forbidden to leave the city. They would have made a dash for liberty but could not go without their Prince. On Bhim Singh's advice five of them, it was arranged, should disguise themselves as horse-thieves and steal their own horses. The guards, on hearing whose horses they were, would be only too glad to take a bribe and let them go, for, in that case, the Rajputs would have less chance of escape. They were to cross the river and wait at a certain meeting-place. This was to be done on the night before the Muharram procession. The others were to disguise themselves and join the procession to the river bank and swim across when the ceremonies were finished. He himself would be with the procession from the citadel, if the Emperor allowed one to go. In any case, that risk must be taken.

Fortunately it so happened that Aurangzeb did not prohibit the procession. On the tenth night it duly left the Delhi gate, wound along through the streets of that quarter, and so out beyond the city limits towards the river. One of the loudest wailers for the deaths of Ali and his two sons was a tall

figure with a black beard who, ever and anon, beat his breast with most convincing grief.

The night was not dark. Bhim Singh wondered whether anyone would notice him slipping into the water. The fatiha was said over the standards and the tabuts; the ornaments and decorations were taken off the latter, and their wooden frameworks were then cast into the water. The standards were dipped under water. Incense was burnt, the elegies on the martyrs were recited, and the people turned homewards. Loitering behind, Bhim Singh watched his opportunity, slipped noiselessly into the river, and began to swim across, under the surface for as long as he could.

Arrived at the meeting-place near a small village, he found his men assembled in joyous spirits. Mounting their horses, they rode off at full speed for home and freedom.

CHAPTER X

A WARNING VISION

PRINCE BHIM and his men received a hearty welcome on their return to Udaipur. When the story of his escape became known, everyone congratulated the Prince warmly. The Rana was particularly pleased with his sagacity. "My son," said he, "you have learnt to combine prudence and cleverness with your impetuous courage. I shall, therefore, give you further important tasks to do in the immediate future, because we may surely expect the Emperor to attack us. It is very unlikely that he will calmly endure being thus outwitted. Now, listen carefully. If the Emperor attacks us in very great force, I shall try to lead him into a trap and fight him on ground of my own choosing. Otherwise his guns will overwhelm us. We must entice him into the mountain passes; do not be alarmed if you hear that I have left my city undefended. We shall recoil only to spring upon the foe with greater force. I shall, however, take steps to watch over the safety of Eklinga's shrine and Krishna's image.

Neither god shall come to harm, however great the dangers that threaten them. You are to proceed to Kumbhalmer to concert measures with Thakur Gopinath for the safety of God Krishna at Nathdwara, and Jai Singh, with a picked body of our men, shall defend Eklinga, to the death if need be. But our guardian deity will not suffer impious hands to touch him. Of that I am well assured. Go now and ask your brother for the story of his exploits."

Bhim Singh accordingly went in search of his brother and found him in the garden playing on his flute. On catching sight of Bhim, Jai Singh laid aside his flute and greeted his brother laughingly with the words, "I have been composing a little tune to celebrate your cunning, brother; but now, come, tell me what our father has been saying to you."

Sitting down beside him, Bhim related the conversation he had just had with the Rana. After a brief interval of silence, Bhim Singh exclaimed, "No more flute-playing for a while, Jai, we shall have sterner matters to engage us."

"Well, anyhow, Bhim, you are lucky to get back to play your part in these 'sterner matters.' So you did not have too much leisure to view the Peacock Throne."

"I can assure you, Jai, one needs much leisure in order to appreciate the wonders of that throne and all the beauties of the palace. They are simply marvellous, but, all the same, I saw enough of them to satisfy me."

On Jai's request that he should describe these marvels, Bhim did so with great clearness and well-chosen words.

"You are quite a poet, Bhim!" exclaimed his brother playfully.

"You're right, I am," replied Bhim, "for I have been playing with words and have forgotten my father's orders. I was told to hear your story from your own lips. So come, tell it me."

Jai Singh thereupon told his tale briefly, and, when he had almost finished, Bhim Singh burst forth: "So that was the reason for your not bringing the image here to this city! I wondered greatly why you left it at Nathdwara, two and twenty miles away on the banks of the Banas. You say the car stuck in the heavy soil. Why did you not try what you had tried in other boggy and sandy places, namely, putting logs of timber under the wheels?"

"So we did, and had hundreds of men to haul at the ropes, but it was useless. Everybody agreed

that God Krishna had in that manner clearly marked the spot for his future abode. We put a temporary shrine over him."

"Well, Jai, it is my duty now to visit Thakur Gopinath and see to the safety of the God. And you had better bestir yourself and ask our father for his commands. Farewell, I have lingered long enough in this pleasant garden."

Bhim Singh strode away briskly. He was not the kind of young man that would let the grass grow under his feet. Nothing pleased him better than to be active in such work as his father gave him to do. He never put off his tasks till the morrow. The brother, from whom he had just parted, often teased him by calling him a young man in a hurry, and quoting to him such proverbial sayings as "A rolling stone gathers no moss," and "More haste, less speed." And Bhim would as often retort that Jai did not know what he was talking about and that it was silly to misapply proverbs.

As fast as Thunderbolt could take him, accordingly, Bhim Singh rode away to the Aravallis to find Thakur Gopinath in the fortress of Kumbhalmer. The Thakur greeted him cordially. "Well, Prince," he said, "I am indeed glad to see you. The story of your clever escape has reached us, but I did not

expect the pleasure of your company so soon. What brings you here?"

Then Bhim Singh explained on what mission his father had sent him, and the Thakur said, "I am glad the Rana has thought of the danger to the image. I was about to send to him for reinforcements because recent news of the Rahtors has not been good. Tahawwar Khan, one of Aurangzeb's ablest and most trusted commanders, has been too successful in his recent invasion of Marwar. Durgadas was outnumbered and outmanœuvred and, to escape utter destruction, has brought his forces into these hills. At any moment, now, I expect a visit from him. But Tahawwar Khan did not have everything his own way. He had to fight hard, and once was caught napping by Durgadas, who captured a number of his guns and, what was still better, the trained foreign gunners with them. However, Tahawwar Khan is too clever a general to be caught napping twice, and, as I said, by rapid marches he outmanœuvred even the skilful Durgadas. Now, Durgadas is a brave man, but he is prudent and clever as well. He knows that the Muslims have not yet won the war with himself and his forces still alive."

"The very qualities for which my father complimented me," replied Bhim Singh with a

smile. "May Durgadas always continue to be my model."

The Thakur was about to reply when they were interrupted by the entrance of his daughter, Premabai, whose face was aglow with unrepressed excitement. Both looked at her with astonishment. Without any formal words of greeting, she burst breathlessly into her story.

"God Krishna is in danger. Mama Devi, our Goddess, has told me."

"When, my daughter, and where?" exclaimed her father. "But, come, calm yourself and tell us all from the beginning."

"I was standing in earnest prayer before the image of Durga Mata, as is my custom. As I gazed at the pure marble figure of our guardian deity, I seemed to see a movement. The Goddess arose from her place and floated through the air until she rested above this citadel. An unearthly radiance shone around her. Then I saw a flaming sword in her hand pointing downwards towards Nathdwara. Letters of fire framed themselves against the darkening sky as the sword's point moved along. 'God Krishna is in peril. The haughty Mughal comes to seize him. Do thou, my devout worshipper, hasten to his rescue and bring him to my sanctuary.' Such

was the message. I bowed myself in humble gratitude. I was in an ecstasy; for how long I know not."

The Prince seized his sword and buckler, exclaiming in his impetuous manner when deeply moved: "By the sin of the sack of Chitor, this shall not be! May all the transgressions of Akbar's mighty host be upon my head if I do not prevent it! Up, Thakur, up, there's no time to lose."

The Thakur caught him by the arm as he was darting off towards the door.

"Prince," said he, "take thought before you leap into the dark. Alone you cannot accomplish your desire. Plan out your action first, let each of those with you know his appointed task, and you may succeed. Rashness will lose the day."

The Prince saw the good sense of these words and replied humbly, "Thakur, you are right. I was throwing caution to the winds. My father, if he heard of this, would take back his words of praise. Let us sit down again and lay our plans."

CHAPTER XI

TO THE RESCUE

THEIR plans were quickly made. Bhim Singh was to hasten down the mountain with three hundred men—all the Thakur could spare him of the garrison. On his way he was to collect as many Bhil bowmen as he could find within easy call. Bamboo rafts were to be hastily constructed, and a long bamboo bier or litter upon which to place the idol, for it was hopeless to think of moving the car.

Along the wooded left bank of the Banas, where the moonlight was chequered with deep shadows, Bhim Singh was soon riding rapidly but silently along with his horsemen. One hundred Bhils flitted like ghosts amongst the trees, taking short cuts and keeping up with the riders. The Prince was glad that he had taken his father's advice and learnt his way about these foothills. A short way below their destination they floated two large bamboo rafts that moved rapidly down the stream, propelled by long poles with two men to each pole. At a spot chosen by Bhim Singh near a steep part of the right

bank, where trees and shrubs came close to the water's edge, the rafts were moored.

Two hundred yards away the shrine gleamed in the moonlight. Would they reach it in time? Already the long sheltering ridge to the east was swarming with the Muslims, who had overcome the stout resistance of the *Kanphara Jogis*. These ascetic militant monks had put up a good fight; their matchlock fire had held off the enemy for no little time. Their leader, posted with two hundred men along the tableland summit of the ridge, had moved his men rapidly from one end to the other to give the impression that the ridge was strongly held. Thus had he gained valuable time. He hoped that the noise of gunfire would bring someone to his support from across the river. Nor was he disappointed.

(It was Premabai's sharp ear that had first detected the sound. She urged on the Prince, who was astonished to see her, for he had no idea that she was coming too. He remonstrated with her. She replied simply that she was but obeying the Goddess's command.

There was no time for further argument. Rapidly they swam their horses across the stream and, lighted by the friendly moon, dashed through the village

to charge the foe. The Muslims did not expect them. Thinking that the matchlock men were the sole defenders of the shrine, they had become careless of their formation. The slaughter amongst their scattered troops was terrific for a short time. On the captured ridge, however, the survivors were soon re-formed and reinforced.

Bhim Singh had no intention of charging the ridge. He wheeled his men about and led them towards the shrine, from the low mud walls of which the remnant of the "split-ear ascetics" kept up their firing, more noisy than deadly. The Prince drew up a score of his clansmen to one side of the shrine, ready to charge any that attempted to storm the sacred spot, and sent the remainder to repel attacks from the village on the further side.

On the bamboo litter, borne on the shoulders of eight sturdy mountaineers, the God was being hurried to the water's edge. A shout arose. Bhim Singh looked round—there to his left came a compact body of Muslim horsemen, two hundred strong, charging down to cut off their retreat to the river. The situation was desperate. There was fierce fighting on the further side of the shrine. He could not join in that fray but must at all costs save the image. His force was seriously outnumbered. The

whole place seemed to swarm with Muslims shouting "Din, Din!"

Without hesitation, however, he led his men to the charge, calling upon the God, now within a stone's throw from the bank, to awake and save himself.

The God seemed to hear him, for, just as they were about to hurl themselves in utter desperation against the foe, many of the latter were seen to reel in their saddles and fall. Volley after volley of deadly arrows rained upon them. Indeed, so murderous was the hail of arrows that Bhim Singh wheeled his men away to one side and charged the enemy only when there came a lull in the bowmen's attack.

The Muslims had lost their leaders. They could stand their ground no longer. They turned and fled. The Prince and his clansmen rode rapidly to the water. Along the bank he found the Bhil contingent of the "lords of the passes" drawn up at short intervals and directed by the intrepid Premabai. She it was who had brought them across by swimming, and saved the day at the most critical moment.

On to the raft the litter was lowered. The bearers jumped down after it, followed by the priests and by Bhim Singh, for Thunderbolt had been wounded

and would not be able to bear the weight of a rider in his swim across to the further bank. The water was alive with swimming men and horses, for the Prince had ordered his men to follow the idol as though it were a standard. Unfortunately the enemy had rallied and were wildly firing matchlocks and discharging arrows into the stream. Many of the swimmers were fated never to reach the farther bank.

With a splash one of the pole-men at the end of the raft fell dead into the water. The other man was losing his balance and about to follow him. Bhim Singh sprang to the pole and steadied him. Together they poled with all their might. The raft was beginning to gather speed—but the stream was against them.

Into the pole between his hands an arrow struck with a ringing metallic sound. Bhim Singh looked up. There on the bank an archer was standing, a few short yards away, aiming another shaft straight at him.

The Prince laughed aloud. It amused him to think that after all he should meet his death poling a raft along like a mere coolie. He laughed still louder at the ridiculous somersault the archer made as he came tumbling down from the lofty bank with a splash into the clear water beneath. An

arrow was seen sticking through his ribs. Again had Premabai, who had jumped on to the other raft, come to the rescue of the man she now adored.

A little farther up-stream they crossed to the opposite bank. The rafts were abandoned, and the God, with his rescuers, was soon lost to view amidst the trees.

CHAPTER XII

THE RANA'S STRATEGY

THE twice-rescued God was safely enshrined in the impregnable fortress of Kumbhalmer. The wounded, both horses and men, were attended to, and scouts were sent back to see what the Muslims were doing. They returned with the news that the enemy had withdrawn as suddenly as they had come.

The Prince could find no words of praise warm enough in which to tell her proud father of Premabai's skill and valour. Everyone acclaimed her as the glory of the Rajput race.

Letters were immediately despatched to the Rana from his son and from Thakur Gopinath, and his commands were eagerly awaited. A message was sent to Durgadas asking him to come to Kumbhalmer without delay.

Soon after his arrival, the Rana's answer came. Moving to a quiet corner on the lofty ramparts, the Prince and the two Thakurs sat down to read and discuss it. Thakur Gopinath, to whom the letter was addressed, opened it, glanced at it, and

passed it to Bhim Singh, requesting him to read it aloud.

"Omit the first page, Prince," said Thakur Gopinath.

"Nay, I wish to see what my father has to say about the wonderful deeds of Premabai," replied Bhim Singh, who had run his eye over the opening sentences.

"What, Prince, you have been telling tales!"

"Why not, when the tales are worth telling? But to Thakur Durgadas we are talking in riddles; let me briefly recount to him what happened."

"Time enough for that later on; let us discuss the serious matters first. Proceed with the second page."

"You are right, Thakur. A glorious tale needs a more leisurely hearing. I shall omit it for the nonce."

So, turning to the second page, Prince Bhim read as follows: "'The attack on Nathdwara came sooner than I expected, but it was only a surprise raid led by one of Aurangzeb's sons, Muhammad Akbar, to recapture the idol.'"

Here Bhim broke off, exclaiming, "So it was my good friend Akbar whom we cheated of success. I hope his father will not bear him a grudge. He

is a fine, manly fellow and a good sportsman—but then, so he should be, seeing that he is half Rajput by birth.”

“Perhaps then,” interjected Thakur Durgadas, “we can win him over to our side.”

“I doubt it,” replied the Prince.

“Now, Prince,” remonstrated Thakur Gopinath, “get on with the reading and leave all comment to the end.”

With a contrite apology, the Prince resumed his reading. “‘Rumours reach me from all sides that His Majesty is gathering strong armies against us, from Bengal, Kabul, the Punjab, and from the home provinces. Their strength is most probably exaggerated but, in any case, is certain to exceed ours because Aurangzeb believes in the weight of numbers. His artillery is strong and his elephant forces considerable. We cannot meet him in the open until we have worn down his forces and captured some guns to add to those which the brave Durgadas has taken. Our strategy, then (for I have taken counsel with my chieftains), is to lure him into the very heart of our country, to Udaipur itself, and then make swift attacks upon him from two or more sides at once. We shall block his lines of supply from Malwa and from Gujarat and keep cutting

into his communications with Ajmer and the north. Our people will be withdrawn into the hills. If we can entice him to follow us thither, so much the better. But without regular supplies the enemy cannot hope to hold the centre. Sooner or later he must retire. For strategical purposes, therefore, I have given orders to the garrisons of all forts, except that of Chitor, to retire after making a show of resistance. Chitor is to be a thorn in his side. He will need to detach large forces to prevent the garrison bursting through the flanks of his main attack. I send my beloved son Jai Singh with five hundred men to be a guard of honour to our tutelary deity Eklinga. The God needs no strong arm of human flesh to protect him. Through the mouth of his priest he has sworn that no enemy shall enter his shrine, and no loot or plunder be carried from our city. To my beloved son Bhim Singh I give command over ten thousand clansmen who will shortly march to the Aravallis. The Prince is to place himself under the command of your worthy self, Thakur Gopinath, or of the no less worthy Thakur Durgadas if he find himself operating in the latter's area. Be of good cheer, and farewell.' "

After a brief pause, Durgadas exclaimed, "Such strategy is masterly. We shall surely win the war."

To this Thakur Gopinath gave a hearty assent, adding that they must now gather their forces, explain matters to their leaders, and calmly await events. Meanwhile what should they do with Rani Korumdevi and the baby Prince Ajit?

"Well, Gopinath, I have been urging her to come here to Kumbhalmer," answered Durgadas. "Mount Abu, where she is now, is too isolated and too open to the enemy forces beyond these hills. But she will not listen to me. Perhaps Prince Bhim can persuade her."

"Where you have failed, Thakur, is it likely that I should succeed?" replied the Prince gravely. "Methinks my father should write to her. His words will carry weight. Let him add that Premabai, a host in herself, will watch over her and her son, and the matter is accomplished."

A letter was accordingly composed and despatched to the Rana, and then Bhim Singh narrated to the interested Durgadas the tale that he had promised. "So now, Thakur, you see that my phrase 'a host in herself' is no poetical hyperbole," he concluded.

CHAPTER XIII

A TRAITOR IN THE CAMP

THE rumours mentioned by the Rana in his letter proved true. Within the next two months the Emperor's strong armies were occupying most of the Rana's territory. The fortresses, except that of Chitor, had fallen rapidly. Some of the Muslim commanders saw a bad omen in this unusual reluctance of the Rajputs to fight, but the common soldiers were elated by the prospects of rich plunder. In a very short time their hopes were fulfilled. Almost without a blow the city of Udaipur fell into the possession of the forces led by Sultan Akbar and Tahawwar Khan, who prepared to give His Imperial Majesty, encamped beyond the Debari Pass, a triumphal entry into his enemy's capital. But the Rana's strategy prevented this in the nick of time.

One dark night, as the Muslims were taking their ease in their comfortable camps around the city, the Rajputs fell upon them, the Rana from one side and Bhim Singh and Thakur Gopinath

from another. The Muslims were driven within the city walls whilst their attackers carried off as much of their stores and camp equipment as was possible. Other Rajput forces slaughtered the Muslims guarding the inner entries of the passes into the valley of Udaipur, and took their places. The armies outside would have great difficulty in fighting their way through in time to rescue Sultan Akbar and his fellow-commander.

Sultan Akbar soon discovered that he was caught in a trap with his supplies cut off. Tahawwar Khan urged him to fight his way back to the imperial forces beyond the passes. But Akbar, fearing that his troops had been too much shaken and disorganised, and quite uncertain as to the numbers of the Rajputs between him and his father, rejected the advice. He thought it better to join the army in occupation of Marwar because his scouts reported that for miles to the west there seemed to be no Rajput troops.

They set out in good order with Tahawwar Khan in command of a strong rear-guard. The Rajputs did not attack them nor hinder their movements. Sultan Akbar was pleased, but Tahawwar Khan was anxious because he knew that their real danger would come when they were crossing the

Aravallis by the Sadri Pass a few miles south of Kumbhalmer.

By a strange chance the Rani of Jodhpur, whom the Muslims had once pursued and so nearly caught, was quite unwittingly about to cross their very path. Owing to illness, Rani Korumdevi had been long unable to comply with the Rana's earnest request to leave Mount Abu and take shelter in Kumbhalmer. When she was fit to travel again, the Rana was arranging to take the offensive against the enemy in his city. Durgadas and the other chieftains who were escorting the Rani made all possible haste, but within a dozen miles of their destination they found the road blocked by Sultan Akbar's army, which was coming into the hills.

Durgadas sent news of his situation to Thakur Gopinath at Kumbhalmer. The Thakur advised him not to risk any forward movement with the royal party. Premabai, his daughter, would show him a most secret hiding-place in a hill temple cut high in the rocky side of a narrow ravine a few miles south of the Sadri Pass. This refuge was approachable only by a steep winding path and was well hidden by shrubs and trees. A safer spot and a more convenient one for a temporary refuge could not be found.



[Photo: Bourne & Shepherd, India.

The Fortress of Kumbhalmer from South, Udaipur

The Rani agreed. Premabai accordingly led them to the spot. Every arrangement possible was made for the royal ladies' comfort, and a small guard was posted near by. This guard had to be a small one because it was undesirable to attract attention to their hiding-place. It was strong enough, however, to prevent mischief from the wild mountaineers. These mountain tribes would plunder friend or foe alike if they had a chance to do so. Though they were now fighting for the Rajputs, the latter, knowing their unscrupulous nature, never trusted them. Meanwhile Durgadas and the other chieftains rode on to Kumbhalmer.

Never for a moment was it thought possible that treachery would imperil the Rani. But there was a traitor in their camp. Thakur Goculdas of Banera, a Rahtor, a greatly self-conceited man, had aspired to the hand of Princess Ambalika. He and his contingent had, with the Rana's consent, relieved the Rao of Bedla and his men in the duty of forming part of the Rani's body-guard. From a distance he had worshipped the fair Ambalika. In time he had found opportunities, in the performance of his duties, to speak to her on their long march through the jungles and over the mountains. She answered him shyly, and he foolishly imagined from her

manner that she was in love with him. He did not realise that she in truth disliked him. The Rani also disliked him because he was so fond of opium.

Now, a few days previously, he had formally requested the Rani for the hand of her ward. That astonished lady had given him a curt refusal. Her manner and her scornful words sorely wounded his vanity and self-esteem. Overcome by a sense of deep insult to his race and lineage, he nursed the bitter spirit of revenge. In spite of the haughty queen, he was still determined to make Ambalika his bride. She loved him, he felt certain, and would not resist forcible capture.

Such were his thoughts and such his feelings as he made his solitary way towards Akbar's army. He fell in with the rear-guard and advanced boldly because he did not wish to be taken for a spy. But the sentries would not let him pass until he had thrown down his weapons. Thus unarmed, he was escorted to the commander's tent.

Tahawwar Khan was for some time very doubtful of his good faith. Not until he had taken the most solemn oath of "the sin of the sack of Chitor," would the Muslim leader pay serious attention to what he was saying.

"Khan Sahib, consider what you gain by so small an effort. Three or four hundred men with a few small guns such as the swivel-pieces you carry on the camels could capture the ladies within a very short time. This excursion to a spot not much more than half-a-dozen miles to the south of your main route need not upset your arrangements. The possession of such important hostages might prove invaluable."

ju "I wonder if I can get anything out of this fellow," reflected Tahawwar Khan. "Why does he talk about the advantages of our securing hostages?" Aloud he said, "Hostages? What do we want with hostages? Alamgir has marched into the valley of Udaipur and has taken upon himself the pleasant duty of garrisoning that lovely place. Emperors always have an easy time. 'Tis we poor soldiers that have to do all the tedious marching to and fro. Besides, we do not make war on women."

"Well, Khan Sahib," replied Goculdas after a pause, "your news is more recent. Remember I have just come from a distant post and do not know exactly how matters stand. It was by the merest chance that I came upon their hiding-place. I have come direct to seek you. Will not the Emperor rejoice exceedingly to get Prince Ajit

into his guardianship? My fellow-countrymen are altogether too suspicious of His Majesty and are only too ready to accuse him of all sorts of crimes. I should like to see the Prince raised, as his father was, to high honour and distinction in the Emperor's Court."

Still Tahawwar Khan was doubtful of him. The reason the Thakur had just given seemed insufficient for, after all, his allegiance was not due to Jodhpur but to Mewar. He hoped to find out his real motives later on. After all, he thought, it would take only a few hours, and truly such hostages as the Rani and her son would be exceedingly valuable to the Muslims in their present case. If the Thakur were leading him into an ambush, woe betide him! Nevertheless, he must take special precautions against falling into a trap by sending out his best scouts on all sides.

Reflecting thus, he gave orders for four hundred men and four camels with swivel-guns to be ready to move in half-an-hour's time. The scouts were sent out immediately in the direction indicated by the Thakur. When they reported that the way was clear, the party set out.

Still unarmed, Goculdas led the little force up hill and down dale for seven miles in a south-westerly.

direction. The march was difficult, for he led them through the jungle as much as possible, not wishing to attract notice. The men had often to dismount and walk their horses. The camels grunted disconsolately.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BRACELET-BROTHER

ALL unconscious of approaching danger, Premabai was wandering a mile or two away from the ravine, looking for a certain wild flower of which the Rani was fond, when two Bhil bowmen came running to tell her of the approach of an enemy force.

From a lofty rock she at length espied the Muslims crossing an open glade. She noted the little guns on the camels and reckoned the probable number of the Muslims to be about five hundred.

Calling on the Bhils to summon their fellows and to take post at the head of the ravine, Premabai dashed back to the rock-temple to give warning. The small guard was assembled and, on hearing the news, with the fumes of their daily opium still upon them, they began to embrace one another as men taking a final farewell of their friends. This, Premabai knew, was a good sign that they would fight to the death.

With the Rani's consent, Ambalika proposed to send a silken bracelet to Prince Bhim Singh, whom

they thought to be somewhere in their neighbourhood. Whom could she send? The family priest, the usual messenger on such an errand, would lose his way. No one had such knowledge of this intricate part of the mountain as Premabai. With shy hesitation Ambalika asked her to go.

Premabai felt that fortune was not kind to her. It was hard upon her that she should be asked to carry on behalf of another woman such a token of esteem to the man she herself loved. She was vexed with herself for not having thought of making Bhim Singh her bracelet-brother, her champion. But being always accustomed to look after herself, and living a free and independent open-air life, she had not thought of doing so. And now it was too late. At first she was inclined to refuse Ambalika's request, but, remembering that the Prince had seemed to be in love with the gentle princess, she pushed ungenerous thoughts aside and accepted the dangerous mission. She hoped her guess as to Bhim Singh's probable whereabouts might prove correct.

Away then she sped around the head of the ravine where the Bhils were already gathering in silence. Footsore and bleeding from her wild scramble through the jungle, she came, at last, within sight of the Sadri Pass.

The Rajput chieftains were out on the hills surveying the pass and arranging where to place their contingents to the best advantage to give Akbar a warm reception. Already his advance-guard were filing into the pass. Not a sound was made by those watching from the heights.

By a lucky chance the weary Premabai soon found the very man she was seeking. She told him of the Rani's danger and gave him the bracelet from the Princess.

His eyes lighted up when he saw it. Reverently he bound it round his wrist with the little coloured tassels hanging down. Then he hastily explained to the chieftains near him what had happened so that they might fill up the positions assigned to him. With all the men he could muster on the spot, close upon three hundred, he hurried away with Premabai to the rescue on foot, because horses would impede them in the difficult short-cuts through this tract of country.

During Premabai's absence the Rani and Ambalika were in great danger. Peering through the bushes they watched the approach of the enemy, and distinctly saw the Thakur of Banera pointing out to the Muslim leader the exact position of their hiding-place. The Bhils did their best to prevent the

Muslims bringing their little brass guns into action, but were driven off by the soldiers escorting the guns. Though they suffered some loss of life, the Muslims succeeded in holding them off at a safe distance and in dragging the four guns up the rocky ledges directly opposite the cave-temple. When they opened fire, the royal ladies retreated to the interior of the cave to avoid the splinters of rock that were flying about. The few Rajput defenders were valiantly holding the rugged path to the cave itself and repulsing the desperate attempts of the Muslims to sweep them aside.

The Rani was kept fully informed of the progress of the fight by her faithful servants. She realised that her guard could not hold out much longer against the determined attacks of the enemy on her side of the ravine, whilst they were also being shot down by the guns on the opposite side. She was, however, determined that neither her son nor her beloved ward should fall into Muslim hands. Accordingly, summoning the captain of her guard, she told him of a ruse that she had thought of as a last desperate measure of gaining time. He was to take a message to the Muslim commander saying that she would come down to him if he ceased fire and allowed her to get her palki-bearers together.

She would trust to his word that honourable treatment should be shown to her, the widow of a famous soldier, if she came down from her refuge.

Tahawwar Khan did not notice that the Rani's message said nothing about her son or the Princess Ambalika. He was overjoyed at his easy success in his little excursion, and readily gave the required pledge, at the same time requesting the Rani's envoy not to allow too much delay.

On the return of her messenger, the Rani ordered her men to fetch her five palkis from their hiding-places. She instructed them to assign an extra number of bearers to each palki, saying that the enemy would suspect nothing from the unusual number of bearers because of the steepness of the path. Two armed men were to squeeze into each palki except the last, wherein she and one soldier would sit. The weapons of the bearers should also be packed away out of sight in each palki. Meanwhile the captain of the escort should take her son, Princess Ambalika, and her attendants unobserved out of the cave-temple and guide them to safety.

The Rani's orders were being duly carried out when Prince Bhim Singh and Premabai reached the end of the ravine. Not a Bhil was to be seen. On the side opposite the temple the brass guns were

being taken down to the bottom, the gunners and guards jumping carelessly down the steep tracks as if all was over. Bhim Singh's heart sank within him. And then to their horror the rescuers saw five palkis issue from the cave and begin their difficult descent down the narrow winding path through the bushes.

Bhim Singh was for dashing down upon the enemy forthwith, but Premabai's sharp eyes had caught the glint of what looked like a shield or a spear-point in the last of the palkis. Eagerly she pointed it out to the Prince, who remarked upon the unusual number of bearers. Clearly the Rani was carrying out a ruse, and inside the palkis there must be armed men and the weapons of the bearers. He decided, therefore, to allow them to go right into the midst of the Muslims at the mouth of the ravine before hurling his men to the attack from the lower end of the hill where he stood.

Having told his plan to his men, he led them cautiously under cover to the spot and waited breathlessly to see the rude surprise that the enemy were about to receive.

The palkis came to a standstill. The Muslim commander, doubtless with polite words ready to be spoken, stepped forward. For a moment he stood

bewildered, but then he sprang back, drew his sword and fought hard against the armed warriors who had leaped out towards him.

Men were falling right and left. Shouts and curses broke the stillness. The few Rajputs were being surrounded. Not a man would have survived had not Bhim Singh and his men burst upon their antagonists with the wildest of battle-cries.

The struggle was short but fierce. It was only ended when Tahawwar Khan and a score of others, running back and mounting their horses, repeatedly charged the Rajputs, who were now at a disadvantage. Bhim Singh fell wounded by a sword-cut in his left thigh. His men picked him up and retreated slowly, fiercely fighting, to the scrub jungle on the side of the ravine. When they had placed him out of harm's way, they rushed again upon the foe.

Tahawwar Khan had had enough. He had not bargained for a pitched battle. Dragging off the unlucky Goculdas, he retired, pursued for two miles by the jubilant Rajputs.

When the enemy had gone out of sight, the intrepid Rani stepped out of her palki, and moved quickly to Bhim Singh. Having seen him fall and bleed profusely, she was now extremely anxious about him. To her great relief she found him

sitting with his back against a rock, lending a helping hand to a soldier who was skilfully bandaging his thigh for him. His surprise at seeing the Rani was great indeed, but not greater than his gratitude to her for her tender anxiety for him.

She told him of her ruse in order to gain time for a rescue party to reach them. Everything had happened just as she had hoped. She had, moreover, kept her word, because she had in fact come down to the Muslims in her palki. On hearing these words the Prince thought within himself that nowhere in the world was there likely to be shown such courage and unselfish devotion as had been displayed by the gallant lady before him. After the men had returned from the pursuit of Tahawwar Khan, the Rani, the Prince, and some other wounded men were put into the palkis and borne up to the cave.

Ambalika and the captain had turned in their flight on hearing the increased noise of the fighting, and were very glad to see that rescue had come and that the enemy were retreating. They hurried back to the cave. Ambalika's joy at seeing the Rani safe and sound was unbounded; her distress at Bhim Singh's wound was very great. With tears in her eyes she warmly thanked her champion; and, turning to Premabai, who had now stolen in quietly,

the Princess embraced her again and again, and thanked her in broken words.

During the time Bhim Singh was nursing his wound, he heard the whole story of the fight in the ravine before his arrival. He expressed great astonishment that one of the leading nobles of Mewar had turned traitor. The Rani informed him of the probable cause, namely that she had sharply refused the Thakur's request for the Princess's hand. Then the Prince, who himself loved Ambalika very dearly, understood a little how this black treachery had entered Goculdas's heart. Sometimes he found himself actually pitying the caitiff noble.

CHAPTER XV

FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE

THE tide of fortune had now turned definitely in favour of the Rana. Sultan Akbar found it impossible to fight his way through the pass. He was hemmed in on all sides without food or water. In this desperate situation, he opened negotiations with Thakur Gopinath, saying that, being himself half a Rajput, he had no wish for this war. He had not dared, however, to disobey his father. But now, seeing that he still enjoyed his father's confidence, he would try to persuade him to draw off and turn his attention elsewhere. For this purpose he would seek the help of the Shiah faction at Court which disapproved of the Emperor's stern policies.

Learning from Bhim Singh that Akbar's sincerity and good faith could be relied upon, Thakur Gopinath allowed him to withdraw to Ajmer on certain conditions. The guns and their foreign gunners, the camels, all but two of the elephants, and finally the traitor Goculdas, were to be surrendered.

When these surrenders had been made, the Mughals were allowed to retire. Friendly messages were exchanged between Bhim Singh and Akbar, who thanked the Prince for his share in bringing about these generous terms of surrender. The Muslims under Dilir Khan, who were hastening from Marwar to the relief of Sultan Akbar, on learning what had happenéd, went back to their garrisons on the plains.

Shortly after this, the invaders suffered a serious defeat in Mewar. The Emperor should have attacked the Rana whilst so many of the latter's forces were in the mountains. For some reason or other he had not attacked him, though his commanders urged him to do so. As Raja Shiam Singh had once observed, Alamgir could be very obstinate against good advice.

In possession of the long-desired guns and trained gunners, a few captured from Sultan Akbar in the surprise attack on Udaipur and many surrendered by him in the Sadri Pass, the Rana decided to take the initiative. He fought a desperate pitched battle on the banks of the little river Berach. All day long the battle raged, with heavy losses on both sides. The Rana would have been defeated but for a most curious accident.

The Emperor had just thrown into the fight a very strong force of cavalry hitherto held in reserve. He followed them up on his war-elephant. Victory was in his grasp. The Rajputs were being driven back slowly but surely. Soon they would be routed.

The elephant was pushing its way through some scrub; a small nullah barred its path. It was necessary to go round it. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the beast lifted its trunk and trumpeted madly with pain and terror. It turned, with blood gushing from its two fore-legs. The mahout savagely dug his iron prong into its head again and again. The bodyguard drove at it with their lances and were dashed aside like waves before the prow of a ship. The elephant would not be turned to face again the enemy that he dreaded more than all else in the world—a wild boar and his tushes. Out of that small nullah a wild boar had dashed. He had lain there all day, annoyed at the trappings and confusion all around him. Now, his patience being exhausted, he was very angry and determined at last to make some one very sorry for disturbing his peace.

The cavalry on the extreme flanks gave way first. They had not seen exactly what had happened.

They imagined that the Emperor was in flight, or sorely wounded and being carried to the rear. The musketeers deemed it prudent to get a good start from pursuers. They threw down their heavy weapons and fled. The body-guard held together, and their bashis and mansabdars, dashing hither and thither, did their best to prevent the panic. Their efforts were in vain. In fifteen minutes the conquering army became a howling mob falling over one another in their headlong rout.

The amazement of the Rana and his allies at this unexpected happening was beyond belief. But they took instant advantage of it and set out in hot pursuit. They captured the imperial standards and—what was far more useful—a number of elephants, together with twenty heavy guns.

In spite of this defeat, Aurangzeb still held his ground further north, waiting for fresh reinforcements. The Rajputs were short of supplies. The land had been laid waste. What they could not carry to the hills had been destroyed. The Rana must, he knew well, rout the shaken armies of Aurangzeb before he could send his troops down, into the rich provinces of Malwa and Gujarat and thereby re-provision his own armies in the field. Bhim Singh knew his father's perplexities, and

determined, if possible, to do some daring deed that would bring to an end this destructive warfare. His wound had not been sufficiently healed to allow him to take part in the recent battle, and so he was all the more eager to find a chance of daring adventure.

CHAPTER XVI

A MAD SCHEME

WHEN Jai Singh returned to Udaipur from the campaign he found his brother able to ride his horse again and eager to be out in the field against the enemy. The two Princes, having seen very little of each other during the past weeks, had much to narrate. Seated in their favourite corner in the palace garden, they spent a whole afternoon in the recital of their experiences.

"Tell me, Jai," began his brother, "about the sad ceremony of outlawing the traitor Goculdas. I wonder the Rana did not put him to death."

"You need not wonder, Bhim," replied Jai Singh, "for the shame of outlawry is worse than death, and a more terrible punishment to a man of feeling. All the chieftains were assembled here in front of the palace in solemn durbar. Goculdas was led forward dressed entirely in black from turban to shoes. The Rana pronounced sentence upon him that within twenty-four hours he should remove himself from the sight of loyal men. If, after this

time of grace, he were found anywhere in Rajput territory, every man's hand would be against him; any one might kill him without fear of punishment. Then a black shield and lance and a sword in a black scabbard were handed to him; a black horse with black trappings was led forward, and he was told to go. Salaaming the Rana and the assembled nobles, the wretched man sprang upon the horse and was gone. I never wish to see such a ceremony again."

"Poor fellow," said Bhim Singh quietly, "and yet he richly deserved it. Now, Jai, tell me about the attack upon Eklinga's shrine. Up in the mountains we heard only confused accounts of it."

"You would have laughed, Bhim, had you seen the way in which Eklinga repulsed ^{~~draw back~~} the impious attackers. First of all the Muslims tried to force the entrance to the narrow valley from the north, but we had shut the gates and started rolling down rocks upon them. So they desisted. Then they attacked from the south and battered down the massive gate by the help of elephants. Those of us who could leave the northern side rushed down to the long road between the shrine and the broken gate. But the enemy had brought their guns with them. This alarmed us because the temple could

have been smashed to pieces before we could hope to capture the guns. The old priest stood there smiling, and re-assured us that no harm would befall the deity. He was right, for the noise of the first shot, echoing loudly in that narrow gorge, disturbed the wild bees. Down they swarmed upon the disturbers of their peace, and very soon elephants, horses and men were thrown into utter confusion. They bolted at top speed, pursued for miles by the infuriated insects. We never learnt how many were stung to death or lost their lives in that wild rush, but I think not a few did. The God's defence was very effective, for they never attacked us again. Now, Bhim, it is my turn to be listener."

Bhim Singh laughingly agreed, and launched into his long story, giving his brother a very vivid account of the attack upon the rock temple. He also, in rather a confused way, spoke about the silken bracelet sent to him by Princess Ambalika.

Their conversation was interrupted by the coming of Jagat Singh, who had commanded Bhim Singh's Ranawat escort in Delhi. After saluting the brothers, Jagat Singh said he had come to report a rumour that Aurangzeb was leaving his armies in the field and retiring to Ajmer with only a small body-guard. Here was a chance for such a daring enterprise as

Bhim Singh had been desiring. ' Now that he had quite recovered from his wound, he should seize this opportunity. Sawaldas was raiding the Muslim supply columns from the north; they might work in conjunction with him and capture the Emperor. There was no time to lose.

As the Rana was absent with a distant army the Prince could not ask his permission. However, he set out with the men of his former Delhi escort and a few more. They rode rapidly northward and in a short time came in sight of the Emperor's slow-moving camp in spite of the fact that they had been obliged to take a roundabout route.

Of success in their enterprise they were now much less hopeful. The Emperor's so-called small body-guard turned out to be no less than five thousand men. The camp was strongly guarded. Bhim Singh rejected Jagat Singh's idea of calling upon Sawaldas to come down from the hills and join them in a night attack, because he had formed a more daring plan of kidnapping the Emperor from the very midst of his camp.

" My plan, Jagat Singh, is no doubt a mad scheme, but we may as well try it now that we are here. We will ambush some bazaar-suppliers, take their dress and their goods, learn the pass-word, walk

boldly into the camp and set up shop ourselves. We know enough of their dialect to escape detection, if we do not speak too much. After that we must set our wits to work."

"A splendid idea," exclaimed Jagat Singh excitedly. "We ought to know how to play the part, for we lounged about the Delhi bazaars long enough. Prince, yourself, myself, Jaswant and Bhang will do the business as soon as possible."

Fortune favoured them. The very next day they captured some Punjabi traders coming into the camp with horse-food. So Bhim Singh's plan was acted upon without delay. The following evening found them installed in the long bazaar street of the very well-arranged camp, not far from the right side of the royal enclosure in the middle. Horse-food was, of course, their stock-in-trade. They managed the camp dialect passably well, but luckily no Punjabi troopers came their way, else they might have been asked awkward questions. It was clear to them, however, that their next step must be taken without delay. In a day or two discovery would be certain.

Bhim Singh proposed to enter the Emperor's tent by stealth, put a gag in his mouth to prevent any outcry, throw a sack over his head and bind

his limbs, and then carry him out covered with hay. The very daring nature of this proposal so pleased the imagination of these bold men that not one of them thought whether or no it would displease their Rana. Now, courtesy to friend and foe alike was Rana Raj Singh's motto.

They then debated, as they sat behind the sacks of grain and bundles of hay in their booth, as to the best hour for this daring attempt. For the Muslims kept good watch. All round the camp the guard-fires were burning. Round each amir's quarters the watchmen were calling out as they went, "*Khabardar*." The Kotwal's soldiers were moving up and down the bazaars uttering the same cry, and every little while blowing a trumpet. Robbers when caught were put to death. It would be very dangerous to be caught loitering aimlessly about.

Thus it was clear that the Prince should set out whilst the camp was still astir and after the amirs had returned to their quarters from their customary attendance at the tent of audience; for not until then would the Emperor retire for the night. The Prince must carry a sack of provender on his back and bend his head down. He must seem to be a merchant's servant going to deliver horse-food to one of the royal grooms in the tents near the imperial

enclosure. Thus he could pass the guards without raising undue suspicions.

During daylight Bhim Singh had marked the spot where an entrance might easily be made. A large banyan tree stood just outside the royal enclosure, its branches overhanging the screen wall. It was a fine old tree, with its main trunk surrounded by several smaller ones having convenient hiding-space between them.

It was, therefore, without difficulty that Bhim Singh, after passing one of the sentries unchallenged, slipped between these trunks in the dark. Into that space he emptied the bundles of hay from his sack, then sprang into the branches and waited a weary hour before, as lightly as a cat, he jumped down on the inner side of the wall.

No one was moving, though lights were still burning in some of the tents. Crawling rapidly forward in the direction of the lofty audience tent, whose dark outlines he could dimly see against the sky, he came to another screen wall. He cut through the cloth with his knife and continued on hands and knees picking his way between some smaller tents towards the central one where he thought the Emperor might be. He had to take particular care in his movements not

The central tent was a large two-pole tent with an outer passage running all round it. Bhim Singh lay and listened. In the passage he could hear someone breathing. Cautiously he crawled all round three sides; he dared not go across the front, for two men were on guard outside the entrance.

He decided to try his chance from the rear. Loosening a couple of cords that held down the flap of the tent, he pushed his head and shoulders with the sack across them inside. Drowsy body-servants were sitting dozing in the passage. From the breathings he surmised that there were two of them, one at each corner. He drew his legs inside and, still covered with the large sack, pulled himself along till his head touched the inner wall of the tent. Cautiously, very cautiously, he cut a small peep-hole and looked within.

There was his victim lying propped up on a gilt couch, reading a book, with lamps burning on tripod stands on either side of his head. "'Tis hopeless," thought the Prince. "I shall never be able to do it; who would have thought that the old man would be piously reading the QUR'AN at this time of night? Had he been quietly asleep I should have had an excellent chance. But now, so near and yet so far!"

The Emperor began reciting the text in a low tone. The dozing servants roused themselves. One rose to his feet and stretched his arms with a suppressed yawn, and began carefully to grope his way along to sit down by his companion. Bhim Singh heard the movement and started to beat a retreat, crawling backwards towards the loosened tent-flap. By some mischance his feet missed the place. The man was almost upon him; he twisted his body round so as to lie parallel to the outer tent wall. He was not quick enough. The sack half slipped off his shoulders and by an ill-fate caught the walker's foot.

The man stopped to pick it up, cursing under his breath the untidy ways of his companion, who was always leaving his clothes lying about. Bhim Singh had just found the opening and was wriggling through it when, unfortunately, the servant's hand touched his foot. Instantly alive to danger, the man called as loudly as he dared to his fellow the one word "Robbers!" The other man rushed round to the front and warned the two guards, who ran rapidly to the rear, one on each side of the tent.

Meanwhile the servant whose hand had touched Bhim Singh's foot immediately dropped to his knees and tried to wriggle his way out in pursuit. The Prince, who still held the sack, threw it over his

enemy's head and jerked him over the ropes. He then rose and, stooping low, he began to run along in the direction of the tree. He had not gone many paces before he bumped into one of the guards with such violence that he took the man's breath away and doubled up him for a moment or two.

The respite was just long enough. The Prince reached the tree, swung himself up into the branches again, and listened to discover if the coast was clear. Within the enclosure torches were being carried about by searchers for the bold intruder.

Luckily the outside sentry was at the far end of his beat. So, seizing his chance, the Prince dropped lightly to the ground and made his way, dodging along in the shadows, back to his three anxious companions. Breathlessly he told them he had failed. They must slip out of camp early next morning and return to Udaipur.

CHAPTER XVII

THE OUTLAW

ON his return to Udaipur, Bhim Singh found his father impatiently awaiting him. The Rana had some further work for him to do. Luckily for the Prince, his father asked him no questions, and so the young man held his tongue about his mad escapade. He had had time to reflect that his father would have reprimanded him very severely had he treated even his worst enemy in such a shamefully ludicrous manner. The men who had gone with him were all sworn to secrecy.

Now his task was to lead an expedition of five thousand men into Gujarat. The Rana needed supplies very badly and so was sending his son to plunder Gujarat, and his minister Dayal Sah, a man of high courage and activity, to raid Malwa.

Away, then, one bright crisp morning, the eager Prince led his force towards the hilly tracts to the south. Their route lay across sixty miles of wild forest country sparsely inhabited by the savage Bhils and lawless tribes of mixed descent. The

Rana had no jurisdiction here, and the tribes lived by robbery and plunder or upon the proceeds of blackmail levied on villages. But now "the lords of the passes" were in friendly alliance with the Rana. Nevertheless it was not safe to travel alone or in very small parties.

They passed through several Bhil settlements as they rode along the thickly-wooded valleys and over the rocky hills. From each settlement the Prince gathered contingents of bowmen. These wild mountaineers were easily attracted by the promise of a good share of the plunder.

In the last of the tribal settlements the Rajputs were delayed for several days. The headman who was to have led the contingent of his clan had met a violent death. The Bhils would not set out before they had celebrated the funeral feast. Now it so happened that the morning of Bhim Singh's arrival was the twelfth day after the headman had met his death. All his friends from far and near had assembled to do him honour. That day was to be spent in performing the funeral ceremonies; on the next day the feast would be held.

The delay could not be helped. The Prince and his men were obliged to wait. They made use of the time by exploring their best route down the

ghat. Having chosen the mountain stream that seemed most likely to be their surest guide, they started to return to their bivouac near the Bhil settlement, where the feasting was now at its height and the crude liquor supplied by the heir was making the revellers very drunk. "Another delay," gloomily reflected the Prince, as he heard the drunken songs in the distance, "but I cannot wait over-long for these men to recover their wits."

Even as these thoughts were passing through his mind, his good horse Thunderbolt spied at a black object lying under a fig tree in an open clearing at the bottom of a glen. Patting Thunderbolt's glossy neck, Bhim Singh brought him towards the black object and discovered it to be a man lying asleep full length upon the sward. In a moment he recognised him to be Goculdas, the outlawed traitor. Near by, under some trees on the hill slope, a black horse was quietly cropping the grass.

Dismounting, the Prince roughly shook the sleeper, who shortly sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"What means this unmannerly disturbance?" he growled in a thick voice. "Canst thou not leave an unhappy wretch alone?"

"Rise, Goculdas, I, Bhim Singh, bracelet-brother

to the Princess Ambalika, have a score to settle with thee ! ”

At the sound of this voice, Goculdas rose slowly to his feet and stood swaying unsteadily. He tried to regain his proper senses, and to remember who it was that had spoken to him.

“ Bhim Singh, Bhim Singh? What brings him to these wild parts? ” he muttered, drowsily bewildered. “ Can he, like me, be going to cast in his fortunes with the bold Mahratta? ”

And then memory came back to his befuddled brain. He answered slowly, “ Well, Prince Bhim, so you have tracked me down, though I know not how; but now, I beg you, leave me for two hours more to sleep off this opium, and then I shall be ready to settle the score. Perchance I shall not find you so easy a prey as that thick-headed Bhil robber whom I shot some twelve days back, but I do not love my life enough to fear risking it in a stern fight. A duel to the death in true Rajput style is more to my liking than shooting down sneakish horse-thieves.”

“ So it is thou whom we must thank for the funeral feast and the annoying delay in our urgent business,” remarked the Prince. “ Well, well, sleep off the fumes of thy potion, miserable caitiff, and then be prepared to meet thy doom.”

“Speak not too rashly, fair sir,” replied Goculdas, whose senses were rapidly awakening. “You will find me a formidable adversary. A man may be an outlaw, but it does not follow that he is a coward or a caitiff. He gets plenty of practice in self-defence, you must remember.”

When he had thus spoken, Goculdas laid himself down again to sleep, whilst the Prince and his companions drew off to the hillside, dismounted and stretched themselves upon the grass.

At the appointed time Goculdas arose, shook himself, stretched his arms and drew a few deep breaths. He whistled to his steed, who neighed in reply and came trotting to his master to be saddled and bridled. Then the outlaw with calm deliberateness buckled on his coat of mail and his sword. With his lance in his right hand and his black shield upon his left arm he sprang lightly into the saddle and gave a shout to announce that he was ready.

In truth he was, as he had said, a formidable adversary. Tall and powerfully built, he had long muscular arms. Being much older than the Prince, he had more experience in fighting. He was an excellent horseman and expert in the use of his weapons.

The Prince cantered slowly up to him in order to settle the terms of the combat. They agreed that it was to be a fight to the bitter end. If a lance were broken, the lances of the Prince's companions were to be used. If all the lances were splintered without either of them being thrown from the saddle, then they should fight with swords or dismount and continue the fight on foot. Again, if either were dismounted by a lance-thrust or by any mischance, the duel was to be fought out on foot with sword and dagger until one or other should be killed. The idea of flight never occurred to either of them.

The ground was favourable for such a contest. The glen with its open grassy bottom was some eighty yards long in a straight line. The only obstacle was the large fig tree that stood rather near the path half-way down the glen. However, they found that the boughs were high enough to permit a horseman to pass under them if he were not swinging a sword. Therefore it was agreed that the sword should be used only when they fought on foot.

After these conditions had been settled, each rode back to his end of the glen. Turning their horses, they galloped towards each other and met with a tremendous shock. Each man's lance was splintered

to pieces on the other's shield. New lances were procured, and once more they charged each other.

This time the Prince had the worst of the encounter. Goculdas caught the lance-point squarely on his shield, which, though much dented by the blow, held off the deadly steel head. The Prince had not brought up his own shield in time; Goculdas' spear glanced off it and tore an ugly gap in Bhim Singh's coat of mail under his right arm. The blood began to flow. The Prince knew that he must end the fight soon, for his wound would weaken him.

With clenched teeth he prepared for the third encounter. This time he reached the tree a trifle sooner than his adversary, but most unfortunately he steered Thunderbolt too near it. Just as they were about to meet, Thunderbolt stumbled against a projecting root of the tree. Realising that his aim was lost, the Prince dropped his lance, slipped his feet out of the stirrups, pressed his knees hard upon the upper parts of his saddle and at the same time reached up his left arm. Grasping a bough with all his might, he swung clear of Thunderbolt, who galloped on riderless.

All this had been done with the speed of thought. Goculdas thrust hard at the Prince, but this unusual movement on Bhim Singh's part saved his life, for

the outlaw's spear passed harmlessly between his legs as he swung for a moment on the bough.

Dropping to the ground, Bhim Singh drew his sword and turned to face his enemy, who, disdaining to play false, had jumped off his horse. Drawing his sword as he ran, he engaged the Prince in a furious onslaught. It was all Bhim Singh could do to parry his blows. The wound in his side was sapping his strength. Back and back he leaped to escape the savagely-swinging sword of his foe. One mighty blow split his shield, already much damaged; his left arm felt the sharp cut of the cleaving sword. Too much shaken to use his sword, he sprang back and, throwing the now useless shield from him, with his left hand he drew his dagger. ✓

It was now or never. He ran in boldly right under the downward rush of his enemy's sword, dropping, as he did so, on one knee and jerking his head to one side. He hoped thus to catch the force of the blow near the hilt and so lessen its power. His shoulders were guarded by a doubly thick steel chain-mail, and his back also was well enough protected, but he had to trust to his good luck to get his head out of the way in time.

Goculdas, trying to shorten his swing, stumbled against the kneeling figure, upon whose back he

brought down his sword with diminished force. The next instant he rolled backwards on to the grass. The Prince had by a sharp turn of his left wrist jerked his narrow-bladed sharp-pointed dagger through Goculdas's mail into his heart.

It was all done so quickly that the chieftains hardly realised that the fight was over and the Prince was victor. They had been trembling for his safety ever since they had seen the blood dripping from his wound. Their joy at his victory was very great.

Over the dead man they raised a pile of stones. His armour they buried with him, and his horse became the property of Bhim Singh. The Prince's wounds were bathed in a neighbouring stream and bound up. He was faint from loss of blood, but a rest of several days and nourishing food restored him sufficiently so that he was able to carry out his expedition into Gujarat with rapidity and bold vigour.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN SPITE OF THE BAN

WHEN Bhim Singh returned to Udaipur with the very welcome supplies from Gujarat, he found an old friend at his father's Court, Raja Shiam Singh. After cordial greetings had been exchanged, the Raja began:

“ Well, Prince, first of all, I really must congratulate you on your escape. I suppose you got away in disguise on the occasion of the Muharram. You must give us the details later. When I was suddenly ordered off to Lahore, I knew that the Emperor was keeping a sharp eye upon you and your doings. So I feared you would never get away. I am glad you did, however, for now you have had your fill of daring adventures. The Court Bard must be hard worked chronicling your deeds and be straining all his resources in poetical expression, for you seem to have acquitted yourself nobly.”

“ Thank you, Raja, for your kind words,” replied Bhim Singh. “ I must admit that I have been busy since my escape from gilded captivity, and have

had plenty of excitement. But, tell me, what brings you here?"

"Curiosity, Prince, to see you, and a desire to make the acquaintance of your noble father, are the reasons that bring me here. At least, they are some of them. For you must understand that the Emperor gave me leave of absence to 'visit my estates' and hinted that, if I could arrange a treaty with the Rana, he would not be altogether displeased. But keep this secret, Prince, I beg of you. The Emperor realises that he is not making headway here and now he needs his armies elsewhere. Diplomacy can often achieve more than arms. The Emperor is too proud to make open overtures for peace, but if the first move seems to come from your side, he will accept any reasonable compromise. Your father will get more in this way ^{than} by continuing the war, because, after all, Alamgir's resources are very great and he can exhaust you sooner than you can tire him out."

"True, but you said he needs his armies elsewhere."

"Yes, if he can remove them from here. But his projects in the Deccan can afford to wait. Moreover, when honourable terms are settled, you can come and join us. You have made your

mark already and will win fortune and increasing fame."

"What I want to do just now is to win a bride," laughingly remarked the Prince.

"Ah, ha, brother," said Jai Singh at the door, "what is this I hear about winning a bride? The least difficult of all your enterprises, I should say, for the lady's heart is already won and the token is round your wrist."

Raja Shiam Singh was amused at Bhim Singh's looks of confusion at these remarks and, for the first time, noticed the silken bracelet round his wrist.

"Who is the fortunate lady, Prince?" he asked.

"Why, none other than the fair Ambalika, Princess of Amber," replied Jai Singh for his brother.

"H'm," remarked the Raja, "that is an awkward choice. Do you not know of the ban against such a union?"

"Ban against such a union!" exclaimed both Princes at once. "What ban can there be in this case?"

"Well, the Princess belongs to the Kachhwaha clan. Now, that clan and some others, the Rahtors for example, have given daughters in marriage to the Mughals whereas the Sesodias never have. So

they dislike their princes marrying into clans whose blood they think is not pure."

"I shall marry the girl of my choice, in spite of any ban," impetuously exclaimed Bhim Singh.

"Do not be in too great a hurry, brother. I came here to tell you that our father is giving you the fief of Banera that the traitor Goculdas once held. You had better take possession of that first before you marry Ambalika. Even then the Rana may be so vexed with your marriage that he may deprive you of the fief forthwith. Have you con-sidered that?"

"What care I?" replied Bhim Singh. "I shall go and carve out a fortune for myself with my good sword."

"It seems to me," said Raja Shiam Singh, "that if you are determined to risk your father's displeasure and marry this lady you can do so only by a sudden capture of the bride. Neither her guardian, Rani Korumdevi, nor your father would sanction a formal marriage with full state ceremonial. They might accept the marriage, however, once it was accomplished without their knowledge. The Rana might take back your estates, but he could not take away your bride. Then you must come and join the Emperor's service."

"Thank you for the hint, Raja," said Bhim Singh. "I must think it out. Premabai, Thakur Gopinath's daughter, will help us, I am sure."

Shortly after this conversation, Bhim Singh, duly invested with the fief of Banera for which he did homage, set out to take possession of his new home. On his way, however, he learnt by an express messenger from Jai Singh that Rani Korumdevi, who was at the moment the guest of Thakur Gopinath in Ghanerao, was arranging the marriage of Ambalika to Rao Kesri Singh of Bednor, a Pramar nobleman.

Bhim Singh immediately turned his horse in the direction of Ghanerao, sending on ahead of him a letter to the kindly-natured Premabai, asking her to help him to carry off Ambalika. He said that he would stay outside the town awaiting her reply.

Now it so happened that this letter reached Premabai just when her tender heart was troubled on account of her friend Ambalika, who disliked the Rani's choice of a bridegroom. The two girls were sitting one evening on the wall of Ghanerao Fort. Ambalika was bewailing her fate. She did not know, until Premabai told her of the ban, why the kind Rani, who had been more than a mother to her, had not chosen her bracelet-champion for

her husband. She then feared that Bhim Singh, knowing of the ban, would never think of her as his bride.

"Cease your griefs and fears, dear Princess. Bhim Singh cares naught for any ban, but, of course, he must arrange a marriage by capture. He could never win consent either from his father or from your beloved Rani for a formal betrothal. You must run away with him."

"Alas!" exclaimed the Princess, "how I shall grieve the dear Rani!"

"When she sees her beloved ward happy, her grief will cease," replied Premabai. "I shall tell her all and win her over to your cause after the first shock is over."

"Beloved, beloved Premabai, you are the truest friend a girl ever had. But how do you know that Prince Bhim cares nothing for the ban?"

"Because he has written to tell me so and to ask me to help him to carry you off."

"How can it be arranged?"

"Quite easily. You will seek the Rani's permission to go to-morrow to the little temple that stands at the foot of yonder hill outside the town, and your Prince will swoop down like an eagle upon a dove."

“But where is he now that we can arrange this matter for to-morrow?”

“He is not many miles away, beloved. Betray not your secret to the Rani nor indeed to anyone, and I shall write your bridegroom the glad news when and where to capture his fluttering white dove.”

Premabai fulfilled her promise, and the next afternoon the beautiful white dove flew into the arms of her noble eagle. On entering her palki after worshipping at the shrine, Ambalika heard the sudden sound of horses' hoofs. The attendants were scattered and pushed aside by her Prince and his three companions. With a glad cry she jumped out and was swung up by a strong arm to the back of the good horse Thunderbolt. Away they rode round the hill and out of sight, galloping as for dear life.

Rani Korumdevi was furious at this daring theft. She guessed who the thief was. She admired Bhim Singh and thought him a hero, but he had now put her into a very awkward position; how was she to explain matters to Rao Kesri Singh? She was inwardly vexed that Bhim Singh had not told her beforehand that he was going to snap his fingers at the ban and carry off the girl he loved. Then

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she would not have negotiated with another bridegroom.

When Rao Kesri Singh arrived, Premabai and her father pleaded the cause of Bhim Singh so persuasively that the disappointed bridegroom was won over. He was the more easily won over because of his attraction to Premabai, the daughter of his good friend Gopinath. Within a few days, he was able to assure the Rani that he bore no ill-will or grudge against anyone; rather, on the contrary, he was grateful to the bold Prince, for now he had found a girl of sterling worth.

Premabai, on her part, recognised the manliness and good sense of Rao Kesri Singh, who, on further acquaintance, seemed to have many of her father's good qualities. She enjoyed talking to him on all manner of topics. After all, she began to realise, a man over thirty had more attractive and enduring qualities than a youth hardly out of his teens. She felt that she could love and respect a husband who was so like her dearly-loved father.

Both the Rani and the Thakur were very pleased at this turn of events. The wedding was celebrated shortly after the treaty of peace had been signed. Raja Shiam Singh was right. The Emperor concluded a treaty very favourable to the Rana and his

allies because the Rana had seemingly made the first move.

Bhim Singh took his bride to Banera. They were very happy together—too happy to care whether the Rana was vexed or not. By Jai Singh's kindly intervention the Rana was persuaded not to take away the fief from Bhim Singh. Through Jai Singh, however, the Rana conveyed his displeasure, and suggested that, until public feeling in the clan had calmed down a little, Bhim Singh had better leave Mewar territory.

“Heigho,” said the unrepentant young man, “this means, go to Delhi again, I suppose; but not in the same character! Away, my bride, let us away to fame and fortune in the wide world!”

THE END

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